

Chapter 1031 Collaborative Methods

At first, Ves felt ecstatic about Professor Ventag's offer. Which young mech designer didn't wish to collaborate with a renowned Senior?

Yet after becoming aware of the political implications of accepting the offer, Ves began to view it as a poisoned chalice. Would the benefits still outweigh the costs?

Fortunately, Professor Ventag didn't insist on an immediate answer. He calmly waited as Ves thought through the implications of the offer at his own pace. Such a major decision always required a good amount of consideration. The Senior's respect for Ves would take an immediate nosedive if the latter accepted the offer on an impulse.

First, Ves needed to decide whether it would be a good idea for Ves to to draw himself to the professor's camp.

Right now, Professor Ventag and NORA Consolidated possessed two major associations. They were connected to both the DCTI and the Tovar Family.

If Ves and the LMC collaborated with Ventag and NORA even for a single time, it would immediately signal to the mech industry that he had taken the DCTI's side.

While he would doubtlessly enjoy several benefits if he enjoyed the support of the DCTI, was it worth it for him to be on the opposite side of the AUMD?

Instinctively, Ves still wanted to remain out of the catfight between the two major institutions on Bentheim. Yet rationally, he had to admit that he would never be able to get in the good graces with the AUMD. His background and his current associations already disqualified him from entering their inner circle.

Since Ves would never be able to become friends with the AUMD, why not throw his lot with their main rival instead?

Enjoying the DCTI's backing would doubtlessly strengthen the LMC's position in Bentheim and the Republic's mech industry. He would have access to better suppliers, enjoy better protection in the market and open up opportunities for further collaboration with worthy colleagues.

Therefore, in exchange for closing the extremely minute and unlikely opportunity to become friendly with the AUMD, Ves would be better off cashing his chips with the DCTI immediately while Professor Ventag was still in a generous mood.

However, the DCTI was not an independent institution. The higher school in turn enjoyed heavy support from certain factions within the government, particularly the Tovar Family. If Ves threw his lot with the DCTI, he indirectly moved closer into Senator Tovar's camp as well. This was an even heavier implication that would permanently color Ves' standing within the Bright Republic!

Still, Senator Tovar seemed to favor him increasingly more. Was it really such a bad choice to accept the senator's generosity, especially since he already benefited substantially from his earlier rewards?

A lot of people would kill to catch Senator Tovar's attention and favor. Ves had a leg up from the rest with his various exploits, the most important of which was being instrumental in helping the old man prolong his life! Such a gift was of an incalculable amount of value, so Camden Tovar already thought of Ves quite fondly.

While Ves did not have any interest in becoming involved in any of the five founder families, he figured he would be propelled into their circle sooner or later as his company grew and became increasingly more prominent. If he

followed a normal trajectory, he would have to work long and hard to become appreciated by any of the families.

Why not skip that tedious process and make a preemptive move in the direction of the Tovar Family? With the favor bestowed by their patriarch, Ves possessed enough confidence that he wouldn't be mistreated by the family.

Ves did not care about the DCTI. He did not care about the ambitions of the Tovar Family. This was purely a profit and benefit-driven decision. Whether the Tovar Family or Ramzi Family approached him first, he wasn't too picky who he ended up with. Right now, the Tovars had special reasons to favor Ves. Why not strike while the iron was hot and secure this favor?

The warning given by Major Verle rang increasingly hollow to Ves. If there was anything he learned since his return to the Bright Republic, it was that he inevitably needed political support if he wanted to get a leg up from the competition.

Major Verle served the Republic first and foremost. Whether as an agent of Flashlight or a mech officer of the Mech Corps, he only held a middle position which didn't expose him to the necessities to maintain a higher position in society. His opinions were mainly colored by the decisions and actions he witnesses from the higher ups.

No offense to Major Verle, but Ves stood at the cusp of taking a step ahead in society. Of course he needed to take a different approach in matters that ordinarily vexed those with inferior positions.

"Professor." Ves spoke up after five minutes of silent deliberations. "Please elaborate on the form this collaboration will take. I'd like to hear more about the process you have in mind."

Asking for clarification bought Ves some time and filled up the increasingly tense silence between the two mech designers.

Professor Ventag was happy to oblige. "Collaboration between mech designers can take many forms. I'm sure you're already aware of the basic forms. My involvement can be as extensive as you like depending on the form of collaboration."

"Can you provide me with some examples, professor?"

"The collaboration between two mech designers, especially of unequal ability, can take on a form that exist in a spectrum of involvement by the more able mech designer. If you aren't confident yet that you can live up to the standard expected from NORA Consolidated, you can be in charge of drafting a sketch of your mech concept and I will flesh it out into a complete technically-sound design while taking your input into account. If you want to take complete control, you can design your mech from start to finish while I can supervise your progress from a distance."

"Those are two very extreme examples." Ves noted. They also didn't sound very suitable for him even though he felt a great attraction towards the latter possibility. "What about the forms of collaboration that falls in between?"

"The most conventional collaboration would be to work together as equal co-developers in a design project. I don't recommend we go with this route as such projects never end well if the disparity in our design ability is too wide." Ventag shook his head. "We can also go for a division of labor, where you will work on the exterior of the design while I work on the internals. Again, this only works best if the mech designers involved are somewhat equal."

The professor proceeded to explain half-a-dozen other modes of collaboration, each of which aimed to pool the strengths of the mech designers involved in a different way. However, most of those choices came with various downsides and limitations.

It wasn't as easy as it sounded for multiple mech designers to coordinate their work on a single design project!

Ves in fact heard learned of several of those collaborative methods from his earlier studies under Professor Velten.

However, recapping all the different forms of collaboration helped Ves substantially in trying to figure out the best choice. Professor Ventag's personal insights on the benefits and pitfalls of each method illuminated the best way forward for Ves, though not for most mech designers.

"I design my mechs based on defining a prior vision of the end product." Ves stated at last.

"Ah. You graduated from the Rittersberg University of Technology, correct? It would make sense for them to instill this method to you. While it helps keep mech designers on track with their original intentions for their designs, the method will only allow you to express mechs that are only as good as your imagination will allow. Are you aware of the nuances of your approach?"

Ves couldn't help but smirk. "I am a very creative mech designer. I consider my imagination to be one of my main strengths as a mech designer. The prior vision method suits me perfectly."

"The iterative evolution method is more prevalent among higher-ranked mech designers. Are you certain you don't wish to use this method instead? As long as you are willing to push the boundaries of what you are capable of, every design project is a journey of exploration. What we intended to design from the start of our journey can diverge enormously from the design we produce at the end after thousands of iterations."

"Such a method is not for me." Ves firmly shook his head. He already witnessed the other method when he interacted with Oleg, Master Olson's youngest direct disciple. "It involves leaving too many decisions to the results

of simulations. For me, it feels as if I am letting algorithms co-design my mech. I want to make my own design choices, even if they aren't the most optimal. What I lose in synergy and optimisation, I'll be able to make it up with increased coherence and compatibility."

"Interesting perspective." Professor Ventag said with a patronizing smile.

"Since you are very certain about the advantages and disadvantages of your chosen design methods, I'll not argue with you further. It is certainly easier for us to be on the same page if I am fully aware of what you are designing towards. So how do you wish for me to be involved?"

This was a difficult question. The more a Senior Mech Designer contributed to the design, the less Ves left his mark on his design.

Perhaps a normal Apprentice didn't care so much about this attribute, but Ves stood out because this was incredibly vital to his work!

The more Ves worked on a design, the more he impressed it with his Spirituality. The more he exposed the living images in his mind to the design they would house one day, the stronger its X-Factor took shape!

Professor Ventag's assistance with the project actively weakened its X-Factor in proportion to his involvement!

This was also one of the main reasons why Ves always felt leery about collaborating on a design project. If he ever wanted to design a mech with a strong X-Factor but in a teamwork environment, then he needed to be firmly in charge of the project.

To design a mech that fit the values and aspirations of the LMC, Ves could not afford to choose an equal partnership or letting Professor Ventag take the lead in the design project.

Ves needed to be in charge, yet if he insisted on this choice, he also needed to pay the price.

Any mech he designed would inevitably fall short of Professor Ventag's standards. His design simply wouldn't perform as well as one of NORA Consolidated many solid designs.

If the LMC and NORA jointly published such a mech design, then the latter company would come under intense scrutiny. The mech industry would be wondering why NORA associated themselves with a mech design that was significantly below standard from their usual offerings.

Even if Professor Ventag felt grateful to Ves, the Senior would inevitably be less enthused at such a consequence.

Therefore, the right answer involved a mix. Ves needed to test his understanding of the X-Factor and find out the extent he could maintain its strength while drawing upon the assistance of a very capable mech designer to shore up some of the shortcomings of the design.

"This is a design project where I'm allowed to express myself, right?"

"As I've stated, the collaborative project is an opportunity for you to learn something and help you on your way to advancing to Journeyman. The end product is not as important as the process. That said, if you wish for your mech company to benefit from our association, you will also need to make sure you produce a good quality mech design."

If Ves wanted to accelerate his advancement, then he should do most of the work himself. If he instead wanted to boost the reputation and brand of the LMC, then he should instead accept Professor Ventag's assistance on a wider scale.

Ves was not satisfied with choosing one over the other. He wanted to have it both ways, and he saw a way to make that possible.

Ves began to put out his proposal.

Chapter 1032 The Allure of Advancement

"I'd like to be sole lead designer for our design project." Ves firmly declared. "I want to design a mech that for the most part conforms to my vision. However, I would also like to take advantage of your assistance in solving some of the more nitty-gritty design problems and help in optimizing my design so that it can reach its greatest potential. In effect, I would like for you to play the role as a contributing designer to the project."

"Good choice, though you will need to have the skills to back up your ambition. However, I like your confidence." Professor Ventag evaluated. "How much contribution do you expect from my end?"

"Hmm..." Ves tried to imagine how much would be acceptable without severely impacting the cohesion of his design's X-Factor. "How about a seventy-five to twenty-five percent split? I will be responsible for the majority of the design choices, but I will leave you with the smaller and more difficult ones."

Professor Ventag smiled ruefully at Ves. "You're not leaving me with much autonomy. Do you know that this is a rather disrespectful way to treat a Senior?"

"This is the best way for my company and I to gain something from the experience. I hope I can rely on your assistance in this form." Ves replied boldly.

He knew that this was an exceptional circumstance and where the usual rules didn't apply. Ves would be a fool to forgo greater benefits in favor of making a better impression of the professor.

Fortunately, Ventag was in a generous mood. "I will indulge just this once, Ves. Just be aware that this is an exceptional privilege and a unique opportunity for you. Not just any Apprentice as a Senior at their disposal who can refine their work and polish it into a greater design than they are ever

capable of producing themselves. I'm actually rather intrigued whether your bold gamble will succeed."

The Senior did not exaggerate when he described the collaborative design project as a gamble. It depended heavily on whether Ves could set an inspiring vision and make the correct design choices during the design process.

In a collaborative project where Professor Ventag would only be responsible for twenty-five percent of the design work, he would not be able to steer the design too strongly in a different direction.

If the Senior received a good base for a mech design, then he would be able to elevate it into an excellent end product.

On the other hand, if Professor Ventag received a trashy design from Ves, then no matter how hard he worked the end product would never be able to be more than junk.

Even with these perils, Ves still maintained confidence in himself. His various advantages and experiences were no less than most Journeyman Mech Designers!

He believed he could already design a mech that surpassed the Crystal Lord in design excellence by himself! Drawing upon the bountiful expertise of a Senior Mech Designer to increase the performance of the joint design while retaining all of the major traits set by Ves would only result in a mech that embodied the strengths of both designers!

Ves already envisioned if the joint project led to success. He'd be credited with designing a mech that exhibited most of the technical excellence from the work of a Senior while carrying the spark of life that only a unique mech designer like Ves could bestow on his mechs!

Such a great mech was worthy to represent the LMC and NORA Consolidated!

Of course, it wouldn't be easy to reach such a height. Ves' mood sunk back from the clouds as he started to consider the practical decisions associated with the joint project.

"So you accept my proposition?" Professor Ventag reiterated.

"Let me consider for a few more minutes."

Even though it wasn't an entirely good idea for Ves to accept the offer and thereby throw his lot with the DCTI and the Tovar Family, he simply couldn't resist any longer.

If there was one activity a mech designer loved the most, it was designing a new mech! Right now, Ves not only received the opportunity to do so, but also take advantage of the expertise, resources, experience, backing and reputation of a genuine Senior!

Ves was well aware that Professor Ventag held ulterior motives when he threw out this piece of bait. Yet the professor crafted this bait specifically to attract someone like Ves. He swallowed the bait knowing that he'd be reeled in by the fisherman.

This was because he believed that if he swallowed this bait, he would very likely be able to transform from a tiny goldfish into a majestic carp!

A major collaborative design project like this that resulted in a mech design for the market had very major implications! It might even be a bestseller in the best-case scenario! Achieving such a wide impact would very likely push him over the threshold that always held him back from advancing to Journeyman!

As an Apprentice who had been stuck at this rank for only a couple of years, he already felt the numerous limitations associated with this status.

The Mech Corps, the Bright Republic, the Komodo Star Sector, the frontier, the mech market, the mech industry, the MTA, the CFA, Senator Tovar, Professor Velten, Professor Enoch, Professor Ventag, the Skull Architect and everyone else all treated Apprentices like kids!

As soon as he advanced to Journeyman, Ves would be able to experience a sea of change in the way those people and organizations treated him. He would finally be able to join the ranks of adults within the profession and be able to take part in very consequential decisions.

When Ves imagined the power, wealth and influence wielded by Kadar and Neyvis of the KNG, he always aspired to reach the same height.

Even though Ves was pretty sure that he'd be able to advance within five years if nothing hugely adverse happened to him, advancing earlier rather than later immediately improved his circumstances.

At the very least, Senator Tovar, Flashlight and the Mech Corps wouldn't treat him as a disposable pawn anymore! This would at least be able to guarantee his safety and security during the remainder of the war, assuming the upcoming peace talks went bust.

Even if Senator Tovar succeeded in establishing an early end of the war, his early elevation to Journeyman would definitely be able to boost the prospects of the LMC. Even as debt-laden as it was now, there was a huge difference between a mech company led by an Apprentice and a mech company led by a Journeyman!

The sooner he righted the ship of the LMC, the sooner he could begin to accumulate a war chest in preparation for the impending introduction of the new generation mechs and mech technology.

Another consideration was that the sooner Ves advanced, the more his standing within the mech industry increased. Someone who advanced before

reaching thirty standard years would definitely be earmarked as someone with high potential.

Ves considered it to be a vain competition within the mech industry. A Journeyman who just advanced at fifty years old could design a mech just as good as a mech designed by a Journeyman who recently advanced at thirty years old.

Yet because the latter enjoyed more growth prospects and possessed a higher chance to advance to Senior and Master, these younger talents received a lot more preferential treatment from their colleagues, various institutions and even the mighty MTA.

What did this mean? Thirty years was an important if highly arbitrary dividing line! If Ves somehow took his time and advanced at thirty-one years old, he wouldn't enjoy any preferential treatment! This was because he was a fossil compared to the younger and nimbler talents who already became Journeymen while they were twenty-five years old or so. This was how the mech industry worked!

Ves did not feel completely confident in advancing to Journeyman before reaching thirty. Reaching Journeyman was a very difficult chance to grab at the best of times. Nobody could predict how long it took. Yet this collaborative project might make a huge difference in securing this elusive chance.

Even if Ves could always fall back on the System to help him advance his career somehow if he failed to stand out in the mech industry, he would rather rely on his own achievements!

In the end, he closed his eyes before opening them in a determined glint. "I am certain of my decision now. I accept your offer. I'd like to collaborate you with a design."

"Good! We can sign the contract and paperwork later." Professor Ventag jubilantly declared before settling down. "Now, while you are still drafted by the Mech Corps, I can easily ask Senator Tovar to arrange for you to be assigned to me and my company for the duration of your recovery from the injuries you've sustained from the assassination attempt on you. That's pretty much the excuse that the Mech Corps has already adopted when they allowed you to take part in his peace delegation."

Ves nodded in understanding. "How much time do I have?"

"I am a very busy man, so while I am willing to collaborate with you, let us not linger too long on it. Six months. That's long enough for you to produce a good design without any major flaws."

"I'm good with that. Shall I work on it immediately?"

"You can work on it whenever you are not fulfilling your original obligations to Senator Tovar. As long as the peace talks are still ongoing, you should put your full effort in advancing Senator Tovar's interests."

"I understand my priorities." Ves nodded again. The peace talks wouldn't stretch for months and contact wouldn't take place every moment, so Ves was sure that he could sneak in some design work during his breaks. "How do you wish to split the profit gained from sales?"

It was best for them to set the money matters at the start. Leaving it for later would only lead to disputes.

"It depends on our relative contributions, the value of our contributions and which companies will be responsible for production. I highly suggest you leave the production of the mech model to NORA Consolidated. My company will be able to insure that quality will be maintained even at a high rate of production."

Ves did not entirely agree with the Senior there. Perhaps it would be okay to do so for the bronze and silver label editions of his mech, but he still wanted to

retain the right to fabricate the gold label edition of his mechs in his own facilities by hand.

He negotiated for this possibility as well as a variety of other terms. Although they only made verbal agreements right now, they both recorded the conversation and Professor Ventag would make sure to put them into a formal contract.

A Senior wouldn't stoop so low to fudge the terms of the contract to his advantage, though Ves resolved to read the entire contract carefully later on to make sure.

Overall, as the weaker party who greatly took advantage of the help offered by Professor Ventag, Ves inevitably had to give up the majority of the profits.

Eventually, they settled for a relatively 'generous' split for Ves where the LMC received twenty-five percent of the profits while NORA Consolidated ate up seventy-five percent of the profits!

This was basically the reverse of their level of contribution in the joint design project. While it sounded incredibly unfair, in actual fact the split heavily undervalued the huge amount of assistance provided by a Senior Mech Designer and his huge mech company!

Ves believed he absolutely gained a bargain with such a profit split! This was because if the design lived up to everything he hoped for, it wasn't impossible for sales of his mechs to reach tens of thousand or even a hundred-thousand units sold per year!

Grabbing a smaller piece of the pie was acceptable if the pie was big enough. Of course, in order to bake this huge pie, Ves needed to put an incredible amount of effort in designing the best mech he could ever produce as an Apprentice!

He immediately arrived at his first major design decision.

"What type of mech do you wish to design?" Professor Ventag asked. "A landbound mech? An aerial mech? A spaceborn mech? Do you wish to design a light skirmisher, or a medium knight? Do you wish to reiterate your old work or break new ground by designing a mech type that isn't part of your existing mech catalog?"

Chapter 1033 Design Requirements

Now that Ves came around to accepting this mixed blessing of an offer, he wanted to take maximum advantage of this opportunity.

Seniors rarely accommodated Apprentices when it came to designing mechs. The differences in ability and perspective were too vast. If they showed off their prowess too much, not only would the role of the junior mech designers be diminished to grunt workers polishing the design from the side, they might also be incalculably damaged by the exposure to advantaged techniques their minds couldn't comprehend!

Ves happened to be fairly resistant to the latter problem. He was like a Journeyman in that sense as his mind was strong enough to bear the exposure with minimal effects.

At least he thought so. Well, his previous flirting with trying to understand high technology worked well enough for him, he figured, so what was the harm?

Another reason why Seniors didn't let Apprentices take charge was because it was usually detrimental to their own advancement trajectory. Mech designers needed to learn how to design mechs and mech parts through their own efforts.

While this did not preclude any assistance from fellow mech designers, there was a difference between teamwork and handholding. The assistance of a Senior could easily turn into outright handholding as the latter fixed all of the mistakes of the former.

This was a very real risk with the current joint project. However, Ves did not plan to involve the Senior at all until the latter stages of the design phases where he completed taking all of the major conceptual decisions that defined his design.

If Ves made some mistakes at this juncture, it would be very inconvenient and time consuming to correct them. It would also break the integrity of his vision if he needed to reverse course due to a mistake.

Therefore, simply put, Ves needed to put on his very best performance. His fourth original design, after the Blackbeak, Crystal Lord and the Enduring Protector, needed to be a stellar mech even before Professor Ventag got his hands on the design!

To put it in another way, Ves intended to design his mech in a largely solo affair and deliver a feature-complete product that could immediately be brought to market after some testing. Instead of doing so, he would hand the design over to the Senior, who would make an extensive pass over the design and tweak and optimise it in a limited fashion.

The goal at this stage wasn't necessarily to add new features, but to improve and optimize the existing ones while working away at any flaws that didn't take too much effort to mitigate.

Such a method actually reminded him of the Superpublish function, which he had only used once some time ago to give his Crystal Lord some extra oomph.

It was too bad the Superpublish function came at a high price. In return for slightly elevating the quality and performance of his design by ten percent, it painfully prevented Ves from earning any DP on completing its design and selling its copies to the market.

Ves must have lost tens of thousands of DP from missing the earnings of selling the Crystal Lord model!

Even so, he did not regret the decision. Back then, the Crystal Lord needed to be of breakout quality in order to make a splash in the market. If not for designing a mech whose quality surpassed his current ability back then, it wouldn't have been such an enduring seller these days just when the LMC most needed a steady cash flow.

At this time, Ves did not have access to the System nor its Superpublish function. Instead, he had something even better. The formidable ability and experience of a Senior could potentially elevate the parameters of a design by much more than ten percent in some areas!

Best of all, Ves did not have to give up his right to claim the DP earnings from selling the mech, although he did wonder how the System would treat sales of mechs designed in collaboration. Would Ves be able to earn the full DP amount or only a proportion of his contribution?

No matter. Just like with credits, Ves was ready to accept a cut in his DP earnings so long as the mech became a major hit and much of NORA Consolidated existing customer base bought the new product in large quantities!

Professor Ventag saw Ves still deliberating on the choice of what kind of mech he wanted to design. In order to help the younger mech designer along, he provided some guidance.

"You should keep the current conditions of the mech market in mind. We are in the twilight of the current mech generation. The next generation will set upon us within five to ten years. What you need to do is to come up with a vision of a mech that will not only sell well in the current generation, but also in the next generation."

Ves looked up at that. Ventag may have some insider knowledge on this transition. "Do you know exactly when the MTA will introduce the next mech generation?"

"Nobody knows, least of all the MTA." Ventag shook his head. "The contents and timing of the introduction of new mech technologies, standards and regulations is a complex affair that involves many different interests in the galaxy. Both from within and without, the MTA is constantly being lobbied by every mech designer with a stake in what kind of standards the organization wishes to popularize and standardize. Each decision will make some influences a big winner while relegating many other influences to losers. Even now, negotiations are still very much ongoing, and until they end the new generation won't arrive."

In other words, it was anyone's guess on what the exact date would be. However, the general time frame of five to ten years was already sufficient enough to plan around.

"So if I want to design a good mech, I'll have to straddle between the generations, huh?"

"That is my advice if you want to avoid designing a mech that will only be relevant for five to ten years. In general, the price categories of your mechs downgrade by one level after the transition to a new mech generation. For example, your Blackbeaks and Crystal Lords are both categorized as premium mechs. In the next generation, they become less attractive as their performance won't be able to keep up with the newer mechs that come out. Your LMC will be forced to discount them by at least twenty percent, pushing their prices down into midrange territory. Do you understand?"

Ves got the point. He also grappled with this issue several times. "A premium mech in this generation will only be able to sell for the same price as a midrange mech of the next generation. A lastgen midrange mech can only be

sold for the price of a currentgen budget mech. A budget mech can only be sold for the price of a bargain bin mech."

Ventag chuckled. "What an odd term, but yes, the last decision you want to make is to go on to design a mech at the bottom price category. A cheap mech with a listed price of 3 million credits will quickly devalue to 2.5 million credits or less after the change to the new generation. While the drop in prices doesn't sound very steep at first, the profit margins of those mechs are razor-thin to begin with. When you only earn 50,000 credits per sale, a price drop of 500,000 credits plainly relegates your new mech design to the archives."

What Professor Ventag just described also came with another message. One that Ves was keenly aware of. "The other important point that I have to keep in mind is that my new design better feature a high profit margin, right?"

"Correct." The Senior nodded gently. "Certain products are more easily sold in high volumes. Yet high demand also attracts a lot of competition. The increased supply of mechs depresses everyone's profit margins as they seek to lower their prices in order to capture market share. In such a case, designing a mech in a highly-contested product category should only be left to the confident, capable and clever companies of a certain scale."

The requirements of this upcoming mech design bumped up even further. Ves not only needed to design a great mech that was worthy of Professor Ventag and NORA Consolidated's attention, but it also needed to make an ample amount of profit!

Considering an overall price drop of twenty percent in list prices whenever currentgen mechs turn into lastgen mechs, at a minimum his new design should offer a profit margin of forty percent to be an enduring seller across two generations!

Asking Ves to fulfill such difficult criteria would take every bit of effort. He would have to squeeze as much potential he accumulated and thereby design a mech that might very well push him over to Journeyman!

Only now did Ves realize that Professor Ventag's offer did not only serve the purpose of rewarding him and pushing him into his camp. Participating in the joint design project also served as a test of his abilities!

It was a shrewd decision. It made sense that Professor Ventag wanted to test what Ves was capable of first-hand. Records and archival data could only tell so much, especially when most of his designs were several years old and did not represent his current abilities.

If Ves came up short for this test, then Professor Ventag's expectations in him would inevitably diminish. Senator Tovar might also follow suit. Now that Ves joined their camp, it was imperative for him to keep building his relations with these powerful figures.

One day, Ves would be able to grow to a point where other people needed to look up to him for protection and favors, but until that time arrived, he needed to keep his head down and work towards his advancement.

"Can I think about it some more?" Ves asked. "I think I will need some time to contemplate on what type of mech I want to design and what my initial vision for the mech will be. I'd rather prefer to be by myself when I exercise my imagination."

He preferred the solace of quiet isolation when he came up with these ideas. As much as Professor Ventag's presence offered him a convenient source of information whenever he had questions, ultimately the joint project revolved around his design, not the Senior's design. Ves wanted to emphasize his ownership of the design in order to maintain the strength and purity of its X-Factor.

The professor nodded. "Take all the time you want. The project runs for six months, and it isn't unusual for mech designers to take months to deliberate on the archetypes and criteria their designs need to fulfill. Even so, don't waste your time trying to second-guess yourself all the time. If you are confident in your decision, just make it and move on. Perfect design concepts don't exist. Stupid ideas can result in brilliant innovative mech designs while clever ideas may end up producing garbage designs."

Basically, Professor Ventag warned Ves that it was the execution of the design process that really mattered. The initial concept and vision of a mech did not have to be as perfect or exceptional as possible in order to form the base of a bestselling mech.

As Ves exited the design studio, he slowly walked back to the lounge instead of his cabin. Before he knew it, he returned in Lord Javier's company.

"What did that mech designer want?" The noble asked.

"Design a new mech together."

"That's a big deal right?"

"Yeah. It's mostly up to me to determine what kind of mech I want to design."

Lord Javier didn't look very interested. Someone like him mainly piloted custom mechs tailored for his use. The mass-produced mech models marketed towards the private sector mainly couldn't keep up with his performance.

"So what are you planning to design?"

"I'm not sure yet." Ves admitted. "I'm trying to decide whether to go for something familiar or something new. An opportunity like this doesn't come every day, so I have to make a very careful decision on what to design."

When it came to the type of mechs he wanted to design, he already came up with two possible choices.

They were both spaceborn mechs.

Chapter 1034 New and Familiar

Ves wanted to tread into designing spaceborn mechs for a while now. Even though he lacked serious design experience in this area, his extensive amount of time as head designer with the Flagrant Vandals gave him more than enough insights on how spaceborn mechs worked.

Witnessing the likes of their internally-developed Inheritor and Hellcat mechs in combat and dealing with the aftermath of every battle tended to bring him up to speed with this class of mechs even if he never designed one from scratch.

He knew their main design traits and their strengths and weaknesses.

Different from landbound mechs, their legs didn't serve as the foundation of their mech frames. Instead, all of that importance went into the flight system mounted on their backs.

This flight system not only consumed a lot of energy, it was also a major weak point present in every spaceborn mech due to its fragile structure.

Unlike legs which could be armored and weighed down as much as a mech designer wanted, the flight systems were as fragile as sticks in comparison. Armoring them helped protect them against shrapnel and incidental damage, but the current state of flight system technology didn't allow them to be covered under many layers of armor.

This basically forced any spaceborn mech to carry around a permanent target on their backs.

The various dynamics introduced with the addition of a flight system onto any mech put aerial mechs and spaceborn mechs into drastically different machines compared to landbound mechs.

Even so, Ves felt ready to make the step into designing a spaceborn mech. Laida Nnvist's tutoring, his own studies, his broad experiences in working with spaceborn mechs with the Flagrant Vandals, his design work on the Evaporating Spear during a ritual duel with the Church of Haatumak and also his work as a supervisor for the mech designers working as analysts to dissect the Vesian mech models at Frozen Point Research Base all gave him an ample amount of theoretical preparation for this task.

It was harder to design a spaceborn mech than a landbound mech. While many mech designers immediately hit the ground running by designing spaceborn mechs from the start of their careers, such a luxury was only relegated to the rich, powerful or well-prepared among starting mech designers.

Even Ves did not dare to enter the market for spaceborn mechs until now.

The added difficulty and complexity around spaceborn mechs meant that there was significantly less mech models for sale from the bottom end of the market. However, the competition was just as fierce regardless.

Having successfully brought two different mech models to markets, Ves did not fear the challenge of trying to compete in the busy spaceborn mech markets. Still, just like before, he needed to be prudent and thoughtful on how to position his next product in the market.

Even with Professor Ventag's help, it was extremely unlikely that his products would be able to capture a big chunk of market share in any of the major product categories.

"What kind of mechs do you want to design, Ves?" Lord Javier idly asked as he took a swig of his mug of beer.

Ves first explained his rationale. "I want to design something new. The LMC won't benefit if I design a successor to my two prior mech designs when they remain enduring sellers. Yet I also wanted to stick to my strengths. I would be doing Professor Ventag and the market a disservice if I rashly design a mech from an archetype I don't have sufficient experience in working with.

Considering these concerns, I've come up with the decision to design a space knight or a spaceborn rifleman mech. I also considered designing a spaceborn light skirmisher inspired by the Inheritor mechs of the Flagrant Vandals for a time."

That cause Lord Javier to raise his head. "A light skirmisher? That sounds interesting. Why did you rule it out?"

Yes, Ves truly considered designing a spaceborn light skirmisher. One of the most prevalent mech models he fixed and tweaked while he held the position of head designer was their ubiquitous Inheritor mechs. He held very strong feelings for this modest but extremely mobile-centric mech model.

Such inspiration served as great fuel in any design endeavors related to the Inheritor mech model.

Yet practical concerns hindered him from pursuing this particular passion. "A light skirmisher is by nature more affordable to manufacturers and buyers that want a quick and cheap option to bolster their numbers. Rarely do you ever hear of premium-priced light skirmishers, while mid-range light skirmishers are also in low demand. They're predominantly sold at budget or bargain bin price levels. Not only that, the competition is so high that profit margins are thinner as well. If I want to keep my mech design relevant for at least twenty years instead of just five years, then I will have to start with a high profit margin!"

The higher the profit margin, the longer his mech model remained economically viable to produce and sell! The longer the LMC and NORA Consolidated sold copies of their joint design, the more they continued to associate with each other!

As long as the joint design remained relevant in the market, the LMC would continue to be able to borrow the reputation of the larger and more successful company!

It was like an older brother helping his younger brother get his footing.

After witnessing the scale and prosperity of the Kadar-Neyvis Group and knowing that the NORA Consolidated dwarfed that company, Ves had no illusion that the LMC was merely a footnote in comparison. It could definitely benefit from the help offered by a big brother.

With longevity as a goal, Ves needed to design a mech with sufficiently high profit margins. This gave him greater room to adjust the pricing of the mechs based on the design according to the circumstances.

The passing of years, the introduction of a new mech generation, the fluctuating prices of raw material prices and changing market sentiment all affected how much it cost to fabricate a mech and how much it sold for in the market.

It was almost certain that he needed to keep cutting the prices of his existing mech models over time. Older was cheaper. This was a fundamental rule in many markets, not just with mechs.

In this regard, it was better for him to design a more expensive than a cheaper one. Therefore, as much as Ves pined over designing a light skirmisher, he would be making an awful decision from a business perspective if he mindlessly gave in to his passion.

While it was possible to design a premium light skirmisher whose excellent performance more than warranted its considerable price tag, it would be a very niche product. That would be an enormous waste of Professor Ventag and NORA Consolidated's help in designing a mech that could capture some actual market share in some of the hotly-contested product categories.

"So it's either a space knight or a rifleman mech, right? I don't have a lot of experience in piloting a mech in space, so I can't give you a lot of advance. What I do know is that the latter is sold a lot."

Space was big and empty. The fighting distance predominant in space battles was usually at least ten times as large as the distance adopted in land battles. That gave ranged mechs an undeniably strong edge, though the mobility of most melee mechs was also significantly higher in a space environment!

Ves recalled the rumors he heard on what the next generation intended to introduce. "They say the next mech generation will feature a strong evolution of laser weapon technology. If I want to design a rifleman mech in the current generation that will somewhat remain relevant in the next one, I should stick to weapons with physical damage types. In this case, I could opt for a ballistic rifle, a kinetic rifle or a railgun."

Lord Javier whistled. "Railguns are expensive, right? They're also fragile and more prone to break I heard."

"You're right." Ves nodded in agreement. "They're not very practical in states like the Bright Republic. Ballistic rifles are usually cheap but there's not a lot of profit to be made there. Kinetic rifles affords more room for innovation and they're more desirable in space battles as well."

"Even so, rifles with physical damage types lose out against laser rifles in one important aspect. It takes time for rounds and projectiles to reach their target. With how often mechs begin to fight at long range, that travel time makes

those weapons useless unless the mechs can close in. Do you really think you can design a spaceborn kinetic rifleman mech that sells well?"

Ves shook his head. The flaw pointed out by Lord Javier was a serious detriment to the value of any kinetic rifleman mech design. At least railguns propelled their slugs and physical projectiles fast enough to mitigate the impact of travel time at longer ranges, but conventional rifles lacked that power.

"Now that I think about it, it's just not a good idea to publish a ballistic or kinetic rifleman mech unless I'm absolutely confident my mech comes with a compelling feature that compensates for that critical weakness."

A gimmick like the alien crystal technology incorporated in the Crystal Lord served as a good example. His landbound laser rifleman mech design would never be able to stand out from the market without the exotic features the alien tech brought to the table.

Right now, though, Ves couldn't think of any exotic tech that he could apply to a spaceborn kinetic rifleman mech design. The prospects of designing a successful mech of this type became dimmer and dimmer in his mind.

He decided to shift his attention to his third choice. Would it be practical for him to design a space knight, or would he be forced to rule it out over practical concerns and contemplate other alternatives?

"What do you think about knight mechs?" Ves asked Lord Javier.

Since he had a skilled mech pilot at his disposal, he might as well milk him for all he was worth!

"I can't say too much about the mechs themselves. They're too slow and sluggish to my liking." Lord Javier scoffed. "In my experience, the people who pilot knight mechs come in three categories. They're either bums who don't have the skill to pilot more mobile mechs so they're relegated to piloting a

slow but easy mech type. The next category consists of decent mech pilots with a versatile skillset that are forced to pilot knight mechs because none of their colleagues can do any better."

"And the last category?" Ves asked, though he already had an inkling of the answer from his first Mastery experience.

"The true believers. The noble knights in shining armor." Lord Javier sneered, making his contempt for these delusional fools obvious to Ves. "Some of these guys and girls are really serious about this chivalry nonsense. Even so, I can't deny that they're usually the best mech pilots that can handle knight mechs. They don't treat their machines as a cumbersome burden. They embrace its sluggish mass, its formidable protection and combine it in a momentum-based fighting style that allows them to hit harder in a single blow than any other mech type except lancer mechs."

Ves neglected to distinguish between the different kinds of users of his mechs. Influenced by his Mastery, his previous Blackbeak design squarely aimed towards the chivalrous mech pilots, though it did not exclude other types of customers. However, there was no doubt that this mech was harder to pilot due to its higher mobility and performance ceiling.

The question was whether Ves should design a space knight with similar parameters to his old Blackbeak or diverge from that and break new ground?

"There aren't actually a lot of mech pilots in the third category, right?"

Lord Javier shook his head. "Nope. It's crap, and most mech pilots know that. Most of the time, mech pilots are assigned to knight mechs. They never do so out of their own volition because let's face it, there's joy in piloting a mech that acts like a mobile damage sponge for the enemy. To these mech pilots, it's better if the mech in question is easy to pick up and master. A high skill ceiling

isn't necessarily good if the skill floor is raised as well. Do you get what I mean?"

"I understand." Ves nodded.

Basically, he'd be able to sell more mechs if he designed space knight designed specifically to accommodate all-rounders as opposed to specialists in piloting knight mechs.

Yet doing so would also diverge from his prior knowledge and experiences. The question Ves currently faced was whether he should defer to his experience or market demand.

Should he venture even further into new territory or stick with the familiar now that he already made the major decision to venture into spaceborn mechs?

Chapter 1035 Blending Reality

It was all well and good for Ves to consider designing a space knight. He already knew that they sold for quite a decent profit margin for that product or product margin for short as long as they caught on in the market.

Knight mechs were more expensive than other mechs at the same level of specs due to the high cost of armor. The most expensive component of a mech by far was its armor plating. The thicker the armor, the greater the cost.

However, this also allowed mech manufacturers to get away with charging more for knight mechs than say a light skirmisher.

The market expected knight mechs to be more expensive, ergo the mech companies obliged by collectively bumping up their prices despite the stiff competition. Any mech that was cheaper than the predominant price levels were usually sold by small, struggling mech companies.

The danger in maintaining a thin product margin when selling something like a knight mech was that they became immensely vulnerable to fluctuations in the

prices of raw materials needed to fabricate the armor system of the mech model.

Because armor factored so hugely in the production cost of a knight mech, a modest fluctuation in price could immediately double or outright wipe out the product margin of a knight mech model on the market!

Any small mech company that tried to sell knight mechs at a margin of five percent or less was really playing with fire!

In short, as long as Ves designed a good space knight that Professor Ventag subsequently elevated to a higher level of performance, it wouldn't be too difficult to introduce his new product at a product margin as high as forty percent!

His silver label Blackbeaks started selling at 65 million credits a piece when they initially came out. With a production cost of around 45 million credits per mech, the Blackbeak's product margin was roughly thirty percent.

This was very high for a mech designed by a new entrant in the mech industry!

If Ves managed to succeed in achieving such a generous product margin with his first original mech design, then he held a sufficient amount of confidence that he could top that for his fourth original mech design.

Of course, the true cost picture of a mech model wasn't as simple as that. Licensing costs, taxes, after-sales services and more all served to muddle up the profits generated from sales.

Even so, starting high was better than starting low.

Right now, Ves made a rough determination of the market demand for space knights. According to Lord Javier, every mech force needed at least a couple to cover for their more vulnerable mechs.

"Space battles aren't my thing, but I've trained for it in case I ever need to jump into the cockpit of a spaceborn mech." The noble stated as he stared down his empty mug of beer. "Still, I've hung around with enough mech pilots to know that every spaceborn mech force needs them. On land, many mech companies can get away without bringing knight mechs because on most battlefield there's sufficient hard cover on land for mechs to take advantage of. Many times, you don't get that luxury in space."

Spaceborn mech forces either had three choices there.

The first choice was that they could take the offensive and hit the enemy so hard and fast that they didn't become exposed to ranged fire. Lancer mechs and light skirmishers came to mind.

The second choice was that they could fight around their much larger carrier vessels. They could take advantage of their huge bulk to shield their more vulnerable mechs from enemy fire.

This was usually considered as a desperation move because carriers served as motherships to any spaceborn mech force. Once a force lost a carrier, they lost the ability to move around a large amount of mechs! They became stuck and shackled in the star system the battle took place!

The third and most sustainable choice was to field a number of defensive space knights. Space knights took advantage of a combination of formidable defensive power with decent mobility in space to offer continuous cover under changing circumstances.

The tactical flexibility they offered turned them into an indispensable mech type for most conventional spaceborn mech troops along with rifleman mechs.

In other words, this was a product category that always sold well and in relative large numbers.

A high and stable sales pattern as well as increased tolerance for higher price margins in the market all led to stiff competition, however. Ves knew that his space knight design must be a truly exceptional piece of work in order to capture even a fraction of a percentage of this huge product category!

While Ves could rely on Professor Ventag's contribution in the joint project to push his design up to that standard, it depended heavily whether Ves could design a compelling mech of sufficient quality.

He had the confidence to design a good mech. But did he have what it takes to design a compelling mech?

It depended on his creativity, imagination, inspiration and passion.

His Blackbeak design did not emerge from a whim. Neither did his Crystal Lord design. He came up with the visions for both mech designs when he became inspired by external influences.

This was the artistic side to mech design. It didn't matter how skilled Ves was in the technical side of his profession. Without a bountiful imagination, he could forget about crafting an exciting concept for his knight mech design.

Ves was not in an inspired mood right now.

He glanced towards Lord Javier who went on to order another mug of beer and decided that he wouldn't gain any inspiration from the man.

"Thanks for answering my questions. I'll be off now."

"Keep me in the loop on your progress, Ves!"

"Will do."

As Ves returned to his cabin on the Lormant Carnival, he began to consider his approach. If he wanted to come up with an inspired concept for his mech, then he needed to stoke his passion somehow.

Thinking back to the past, Ves knew that he would get fired up to design a mech in two different instances.

The first instance would be when he came under intense pressure. This always enabled him to exert his full potential during competitions and design duels when a lot was at stake.

The second instance was when he became inspired by a good story.

In fact, Ves always designed his mechs around stories. Stories enlivened his mechs by breathing life into the images he conjured up in his mind with the Triple Division technique.

Of those instances where Ves made use of stories to enrich the spiritual essence of his designs, none were as effective as using stories that really took place!

"The Crystal Lord design is a shining example of this method!"

In effect, the Crystal Lord was the result of blending reality with imagination. By basing and anchoring the fantasies conjured up by his imagination with real elements, he gave them an easier path towards materializing them closer to reality!

By making use of the spiritual remnants and story of the leader of the miniature race of extinct crystal builders, Ves succeeded in designing his first mech with an X-Factor rated in the B-grade for the very first time!

If Ves wanted to justice to himself, the LMC and Professor Ventag's faith in his ability to design a mech, then he needed to at least match his previous high point in his career. Making use of real individuals and real history would be a good starting point.

"A real story, huh?"

Ves experienced a lot of harrowing adventures and ordeals ever since the war broke out. His time with the Flagrant Vandals left a strong and indelible mark on him, sometimes for the worse but often times for the better.

No matter how mixed he felt about the journey to the Aeon Corona System and the mission to uncover the treasures of the fallen Starlight Megalodon, he was never quite the same when he came back.

He idly chuckled as he sat behind his terminal in his cabin. He hadn't turned it on because he couldn't do much with it anyway with his current authorizations.

While he suffered through many awful situations, it wasn't always bad. He witnessed new wonders, outsmarted several enemies and managed to come back alive with plentiful treasures, the most important of which fixed the many flaws on his hybrid alien physique and improved its overall parameters.

Ves wanted to commemorate his time with the Flagrant Vandals by designing a mech that embodied an aspect of that unforgettable adventure!

"I've witnessed many exciting battles and strange events, but which ones are relevant to space knights or knight mechs?"

Not so much, at least on the top of his head. Ves tried to go over instances related to defensive mechs and only came up with a couple of examples that didn't really inspire him that much.

"Perhaps the most defining moment took place we tried to pass through the Venidse Duchy."

A detachment of the Frosty Meteors of the Venidsan mech legions cornered the Verle Task Force some time after departing from the Detemen System after a successful raid.

What struck Ves the most was that despite their lack of numbers, the heavy-armored mechs of the Frosty Meteors inexorably closed in on the stranded fleet of the Flagrant Vandals!

No matter how much firepower the Vandal mechs unleashed on the Venidsan mechs, the Frosty Meteors endured an incredible amount of damage!

If not for Venerable O'Callahan moving into action and whittling down the incredibly sturdy mechs of the Frosty Meteors one by one, as well as the sacrificial mobbing tactic employed by the Vandals at the end, they might have never been able to survive their escape from the Vesia Kingdom!

The Flagrant Vandals didn't survive this disastrous crisis unscathed. Half of their spaceborn mech pilots lost their lives and even more mechs got wrecked or sustained heavy damage. If not for their subsequent recovery at the Harkensen System, the spaceborn mech contingent of the Flagrant Vandals would have never been able to stand up on their own two feet again!

This story contained a strong emotional attachment to Ves. Yet would it be appropriate for him to use the events of this battle as the basis of his fourth original mech design?

Ves shook his head. "We beat the enemy, but lost almost just as much. A pyrrhic victory is not a victory to be proud of. Besides, the enemy earned all of the glory for their bold and enduring approach."

The Vandals only won that battle because they outnumbered the small detachment of Frosty Meteors and made use of that advantage in the stupidest and most destructive way possible.

He discarded this battle and tried to come up with other memories that cast a better light on his experiences.

After fifteen minutes of daydreaming, he suddenly sat up straight in his chair. "Of course! When it comes to showcasing the power of defense, how can I forget about that big lovable lizard!"

The misguided attack of the Sacred Gods of the Eastern Samar Pantheon on the ground forces of the Flagrant Vandals nearly wiped out the latter.

Nobody from the Vandals including Ves ever expected Qilanxo's incredibly strong space barrier to be able to withstand a half a mech regiment's worth of ranged bombardment!

In the end, the Flagrant Vandals cheated and dropped a couple of overloaded power reactors that blew up with the force of a tactical nuclear weapon to overload that ridiculously resilient and enduring space barrier!

Witnessing such an amazing capacity from a primitive exobeast instead of some highly advanced device from the CFA left a strong impression in his mind. Ves' eyes lit up as he realized that this event might serve as a good base for his vision for his space knight!

Even though Qilanxo was a land exobeast and the battle happened firmly on heavy gravity soil, it was the spirit that counted. Ves wanted to draw upon the impression of invincibility and defensive supremacy displayed by the mighty Qilanxo.

Best of all, unlike the earlier example, Ves and the Flagrant Vandals eventually made up with Qilanxo.

How strong would his space knight design become if he became inspired by her example?

"It's not possible for me to implement an actual space barrier as a defensive measure for my upcoming space knight design." Ves conceded.

However, what kind of effect would Ves be able to achieve when he incorporated such a strong phenomenon in the imaginary realm?

Chapter 1036 Spirit of Innovation

An inspired mood struck Ves. This was it! This was the magical moment he sought when he decided to design his fourth original mech!

What was his strongest asset? His imagination!

Yet his imagination was only as good as the inspiration that fueled it. Without material to work with, his imagination would only be able to produce generic and listless visions for his next designs.

Perhaps the greatest benefit Ves derived from the System was that it enabled him to boost his lackluster Creativity Attribute into superhuman territory!

Even so, his Creativity often led Ves to conjure up garbage in his mind. Without any material to work with, it often pumped out ideas and thoughts with little basis in reality. The constant questioning also led him into bouts of suspicion and paranoia from time to time.

In other words, having an overactive imagination didn't always help him out. Yet these blemishes did not hinder him from enjoying the greatest benefit of possessing a high Creativity Attribute.

Once he became inspired, his ability to create became supercharged!

In the next half hour, Ves ran with the idea of using Qilanxo as an inspiration for his space knight. His mind elevated into a higher level of activity as he envisioned various events that he witnessed in the past.

Qilanxo's incredibly powerful space barrier.

Qilanxo calling down an energy tornado to fill up her god crystals.

Qilanxo interacting with Ves through her roars.

Qilanxo bonding with Orfan and Dise for the very first time.

Qilanxo stabilizing the surrounding space in the middle of the collapsing Starlight Megalodon.

Qilanxo's ability to maintain a bond between herself, Orfan and Dise even when they were separated in space.

All of these incidents added to Qilanxo's mystique. Ves even came up with the bold idea of outright using the Sacred God or at least a representation of her in his mind as the totem animal for his next design!

Ves paused at that moment. "Is Qilanxo still alive? Will my shenanigans affect her in some way if she is still around somewhere on that planet?"

As far as he knew, the few instances he drew on real entities to construct his visions, he always chose dead people as his base.

He wondered what happened to Aeon Corona VII when he and a handful of others escaped that heavy gravity planet. Did Sigrund wipe out every living being on the planet? Or did he depart in haste, leaving most of the god species and genetically-modified descendants of the original crew alive?

"That might very well be possible."

What happened next was anyone's guess. Perhaps some other sandmen fleets dispatched from the neighboring star system arrived and wiped out all life on the planet anyway. Perhaps the CFA sent out a war fleet that arrived in time to secure the planet and its inhabitants and were studying them even at this moment! Qilanxo could be stuck in some kind of CFA lab cage for all he knew.

The implications regarding the existence of the god species, the blessed people and the cursed people were very significant. Ves lamented that he hadn't been able to retrieve the files for Project Icarus and abscond them for his own use. If only that ominous mainframe hadn't been subverted by Sigrund.

The uncertainty surrounding Qilanxo's current state cast a shadow of doubt over his intention to use her as his inspiration.

Still, an important question came up during his deliberations.

"So what? So what if I make use of a living entity? Will that even be detrimental to the mech?"

Ves came up with a daring notion that using someone or something alive might in fact lead to a stronger effect on the X-Factor of a mech!

Although it seemed somewhat reckless to test this hypothesis on a pivotal project in his career, designing mechs was all about innovating and taking risks. His intuition sent some encouraging signs to him, which convinced him that he was on to something good with his current train of thought.

This was worth experimenting on! The high stakes involved with making his fourth original design a great success increased the pressure on him. The extra pressure made sure he put in his best effort possible in trying to leverage this new variable to his advantage!

The question that now occurred in his mind was how he should shape his vision in response to this determination. Usually, Ves outlined the basic parameters of his envisioned mech before he moved on to creating images to constitute its spiritual identity.

Right now, Ves was working the other way around. He already created one component of his design's spiritual identity, limiting his options and constraining his range of possible mech concepts.

He needed to define his concept for his space knight design by starting from Qilanxo.

Her most defining trait was her space barrier. Could Ves adapt something similar to his space knight?

"Active defenses like that do exist." Ves rubbed his chin. "The only problem is that these systems are too expensive and advanced."

Energy screens, the most predominant form of energy defense technology in the Komodo Star Sector, required large machines and huge energy cells to sustain. They were very poor in energy efficiency and were only really used to shield buildings and mech arenas from collateral damage. They didn't last long when mechs pounded their surface.

There was a good reason why third-class mechs did not make use of energy screen tech.

"Still, there's more ways to cook an egg. Standard energy screen tech is just one of many flavors. There are many other shielding techs available to mech designers. They're just not as well-known and come with other difficulties."

Ves could not come up with something right now and planned to bring this topic up with Professor Ventag. Even if the Senior didn't have a convenient license on hand, it was no major disaster.

Images didn't need to conform to their mech designs in a literal sense. Just because Qilanxo possessed the power to conjure up a space barrier didn't necessarily mean that Ves needed to include that function in his space knight design.

The totem animal component in the Triple Division technique first and foremost provided the X-Factor of a mech with animal instincts and reflexes.

Back when Ves designed the Blackbeak, the principal image for his first original mech design was a black phoenix. Using this specific image shaped the overall aggressiveness and aesthetic appearance of his Blackbeak design.

It did not make his mech into a literal phoenix-like entity that magically rebirthed itself once it got wrecked!

Still, now that he thought about it, Ves wondered if this deficiency affected the overall strength of the X-Factor for his design. Was this a reason why his X-Factor hadn't been able to score higher despite all the effort he put into its development?

Ves came up with another hypothesis. The closer a mech design adhered to the traits and abilities of an image, the greater the effect of its X-Factor!

"There is so much more about this field that I haven't delved into yet." He sighed. "I've developed so many new hypotheses, and this is just my fourth original mech design project!"

He enjoyed exploring the unknown. From his exposure to Seniors, he already knew that they constantly pushed the envelope regarding what they knew in a particular field with their designs.

His excitement grew as he basked in the spirit of innovation. Sure, he might be engaging in some reckless gambles by testing his hypothesis in a critical design project instead of an inconsequential virtual design, but he would not regret it very much even if he failed in these aspects and the X-Factor for his mech ended up weaker.

"It's just something intangible anyway. Its presence or absence won't affect the performance specs of my mech all that much."

As far as Ves was aware of, the X-Factor purely exerted itself by influencing the mind of the mech pilot over the man-machine connection.

In other words, it was all in the mind.

If Ves managed to pull off his new ideas correctly, then the positive influence on the mech pilots piloting copies of his space knight design increased. This would definitely boost their performance by a small degree and lead to higher customer satisfaction.

The more a mech satisfied the mech pilot, the higher the chance of repeat business. Satisfying customers was one of the most basic techniques to get them to return and purchase another product from the same brand.

However, even if Ves somehow botched the X-Factor up, it wouldn't do much harm as his mech model would be no different from all the other models in the market. With almost no one in the market except for himself aware of how to strengthen and shape the X-Factor of a mech, Ves practically held a monopoly on this feature even if nobody was really aware of what he possessed.

Therefore, while he would certainly feel disappointed if he failed in boosting the X-Factor, he wouldn't shed any tears over it. Innovation was always like that. Success followed after countless failed experiments paved the way.

"I should get back to the concept of my space knight."

He imagined Qilanxo's giant form and drew out other traits from her existence.

"Qilanxo is big. Very big. She's strong as well."

Ves gained the notion of designing a heavy mech instead of a medium mech, but he immediately discarded the possibility. Unlike Patricia, he hadn't been groomed to design such difficult designs. He already ventured into new terrain by entering the domain of spaceborn mechs. He felt no desire to complicate matters even further by designing a heavy mech.

"Besides, heavy mechs are rarely sold in the public mech markets. They're usually designed within the military and are almost exclusively used by well-funded military mech forces."

He settled on designing a big, fat defensive space knight that pushed against the boundary of the medium weight class.

Unlike the Blackbeak which he endeavored on preserving some of its mobility in order to facilitate its use as an offensive mech, his next design would be purely focused on defense.

It didn't need to be too fast. Just fast enough to move around and cover for rifleman mechs.

Though a lumbering space knight would never be able to keep up with the movements of a smaller and nimbler rifleman mech, they didn't need to. Most rifleman mechs zigged and zagged in every direction in order to dodge enemy fire. Their effective traversal in a given direction was usually a lot less than the actual distance they covered.

It was like comparing a squiggly line with a straight line. As long as the mech pilots of the rifleman mechs and space knights coordinated with each other, they could insure they matched the distance they traversed despite adopting wildly different speeds.

However, designing such a slow and cumbersome mech did come with plenty of downsides. Its tactical uses were severely limited as they lacked the mobility to accelerate swiftly enough to accompany mechs on attack runs.

This was fine to Ves. He merely had to make sure it performed its core functions well enough. Mechs didn't need to be good in everything in order to fit in well with the mech roster of an outfit.

Ves still felt that something was missing from the picture. What distinguished his space knight design from other designs?

"If I don't offer anything different or better, there is no grounds for us to charge a high product margin on my new mech."

The market wasn't that gullible. Ves frowned as he tried to figure out how to shape the narrative of his mech design to offer a compelling unique selling proposition.

This was the key to distinguishing his product in the market! Merely relying on the name and brand of NORA Consolidated wasn't good enough if he wanted the joint project to succeed in two successive mech generations.

"It has to offer supreme defense, but how can I do this?"

Chapter 1037 Unique Selling Proposition

The problem on how to design a space knight that offered very strong means of defense haunted Ves a bit. It became an obstacle in his design process that he couldn't overcome unless he formed a good solution to address the problem.

"This is a hardware issue. I'll have to ask for a list of component licenses from Professor Ventag. Since he's a Senior, he must have hundreds of good mech parts at his disposal at the very least."

Unlike some other Seniors, Professor Ventag didn't design any core components in-house. If he did design something, it would be purely something small and for internal use only. Ves never heard of NORA Consolidated publishing any notable component designs such as power reactors or mech engines.

This reflected a difference in style and ideology. Some mech designers believed the correct way forward was to take an increasing amount of control over what was being put into the design of a mech. They wouldn't rest until every part of a mech was designed in-house!

Other mech designers believed that diverting their attention to designing individual components missed the point about their profession. It wasn't their job to develop individual parts. Specialist developers already concentrated on that job.

To these design purists, the core role of a mech designer was to take a collection of individual mech parts and put them together in a single cohesive design that maximized their synergies and minimized their incompatibilities.

The fight between the so-called pure design and single origin ideologies raged on ever since mech designers first emerged. The single origin ideology was the predominant belief in the early days of the Age of Mechs.

After all, not a lot of specialists published good components designs back then. The infrastructure surrounding the core mech industry was still in its infancy. Therefore, mech designers often resorted to designing their own components for their mechs by necessity.

It was a given that the results were rather mixed.

A mech designer excelled in designing mechs. As for designing individual components, they only became good enough at this job when they put in the effort. However, this was not always a bad idea as they spent far too much time on distractions and not enough on their core function, which was designing mechs!

The only instance where developing individual component designs was appropriate was when these specific components formed a core part of their design philosophy. For example, Ves did not criticize Master Olson and Oleg's preoccupation with designing mech engines because they formed such a critical aspect to their overall design philosophies geared towards longevity and endurance.

After a few hundred years of continued evolution within the mech industry, the pure design ideology gained strength. It advocated for an increased emphasis on division of roles. Why should a mech designer be bothered to design their own components and thereby slow down their own advancement when they could just as well leave the job to others?

As the Age of Mechs gained steam and mechs became ever more ubiquitous, so did the demand for good mech components increased. An industry that revolved around designing mech components for licensing emerged ever since the MTA implemented the current licensing system.

The competition in the market for component licenses was just as brutal as the competition in the mech market! This competition forced developers to continue to improve and innovate on the components they offered to mech designers, thereby ensuring they delivered better results than any mech designer who dabbled in this area.

These days, which mech designer adhered to which ideology depended heavily on their education, upbringing, chosen design philosophy and their learning ability. Some schools advocated for the single origin ideology, while others propagated the pure design ideology.

It was much more rewarding for mech designers to design their own components. Yet if they weren't any good at it or derived too little benefit from this distraction, they shouldn't bother.

Ves did not possess a strong inclination for one ideology over another. They both had their good points. As far as he was aware of, a lot of higher-ranking mech designers did just fine by focusing on developing one or two components that played a strong role in their designs while making use of component licenses to fill up the rest.

When Ves approached Professor Ventag just before the fleet's arrival to the Harkensen System, he received a skeptical response.

"A defensive space knight is as standard as it gets when it comes to that archetype." Professor Ventag frowned. "Are you not aware that you are making it difficult on yourself to develop a good unique selling proposition for your design?"

"I shouldn't be the first mech designer who came up with the idea in the Bright Republic."

"You just described the lack of feasibility with trying to implement modern energy screen technology into mechs. Not only would they be forced to carry around a bulky module responsible for generating the energy screens, but they don't offer enough protection against damage to make your space knight practical."

"There ought to be better shielding tech available, right?"

"There are, Ves." Professor Ventag nodded. "However, all of them come with various limitations and restrictions. They sometimes pop up in custom second-class mechs in the Friday Coalition, but you can forget about it if you want to design a third-class mech for third-rate states. It's too unaffordable."

Ves encountered his first major setback. It seemed his dream of squaring the circle by somehow incorporating some form of shielding tech into his design fell through. His space knight wouldn't be able to emulate Qilanxo's space barrier functionality anytime soon.

The professor suddenly smiled at the younger mech designer. "All hope is not lost. There are other alternatives at our disposal. They just aren't as good as genuine shields and energy screens. For example, the most practical suggestion I can offer is polarizing technology. Are you familiar with this tech?"

"I've heard of it." Ves said with a hopeful tone. "It's not exactly accessible to ordinary mech designers, though."

"Not to worry. I do possess a license for a mech part that can polarize certain sections of a mech. However, a polarizing generator comes with severe drawbacks. Not only are they energy hungry, they're also relatively bulky. They don't take up as much volume as an energy screen generator, but you'll

have to make many compromises if you wish to fit the possibility to polarize a portion of the mech frame in your design."

"Please afford me access to the design specifications of your polarizing generator license." Ves requested.

Professor Ventag activated his comm and transferred some files to Ves' comm. In the meantime, he described the underlying technology in further detail.

"Polarizing tech is a catch-all term for methods run armor plating or any solid surface for that matter with an electromagnetic field. This field offers a layer of protection to the surface against certain types of damage. It's most effective against energy damage such as lasers, but some applications of polarizing technology also makes them fairly decent against physical damage."

"It's fairly prevalent in second-class mechs, right?"

"Correct." Professor Ventag nodded. "Not all mechs from the Friday Coalition makes use of polarizing tech. They have the same considerations for this tech as we do with the decision to implement compressed armor in our third-class mechs. It's not cost-effective to employ them in cheaper mechs."

The professor indirectly informed Ves of a major flaw in his plan to make use of polarizing tech.

"If the Friday Coalition finds it inefficient, then it's even more of a pipedream for me to apply this tech to my space knight!"

The Senior shook his head. "All hope is not lost, Ves. I'm not deliberately leading you into a pit. The component specifications I just sent you described a polarizing generator that is cheaper and weaker than the ones employed by second-class mechs. While the effect is subsequently weaker to the point of being ignored by the mech designers of the Friday Coalition, it might play a useful role as long as its applied correct. What most mech designers consider

inefficient can nonetheless be a valuable addition to mechs that operate on a different paradigm."

That was easier said than done. Ves already received the professor's message that he shouldn't expect too much from the component license for a polarizing generator.

Ves left the mech workshop and left the professor to his own work.

Seeing that Professor Ventag failed to offer him a good solution to this problem, Ves considered whether he should draw on his other connections to find an answer. Perhaps it was time for him to return to the Clifford Society and see if he could exchange his merits for something good.

"Even so, I don't think it's going to be that easy." He shook his head.

"Polarizing tech would have been a lot more prevalent in the Bright Republic if it is practical enough for use in regular mechs."

Right now, Ves was prepared to mull over this issue. While adding some form of active defenses wasn't critical to his space knight design, he felt he would do Qilanxo a disservice by omitting this function.

How could his space knight embody Qilanxo's excellent in defense without a representation of her nigh-invincible space barrier?

Ves encountered an unfortunate problem plaguing many mech designers throughout the galaxy! Practicality failed to keep up with his ambitions!

A lot of people wanted to own a CFA battleship and shoot everything in their way to pieces. That didn't mean that all of those people actually got to realize their dreams. Unless they managed to get accepted into the CFA and promote their way up the hierarchy, they could forget about captaining their own battleship.

Even then, the captains and admirals of the CFA couldn't employ their battleships willy-nilly and shoot whoever they wanted to without an enormous pile of rules and regulations standing in their way.

Right now, Ves became enamored with the idea of offering some form of active defenses on his mech, but all of the possibilities mentioned so far turned it into a very bad idea.

As Ves studied the details of Professor Ventag's component license, he immediately realized its main limitation.

"This license describes a polarizing generator for a heavy mech!"

The design for the generator did its best to minimize its mass and volume, but even then it took up as much space if not more than the heavy-duty antigrav backpacks procured by the Vandals to keep their mechs running on Aeon Corona VII.

That might not sound so bad, but the main issue was that existing spaceborn mechs all carried an integrated backpack module in the form of their flight systems!

"Maybe I should just layer them after another." Ves considered.

It wasn't unheard of to stack two backpack module-like components together. However, this led to unwieldy mechs with a very deep torso that bulged backwards, affecting the center of gravity and increasing their propensity to fall.

This was a bit less of a concern for spaceborn mechs, but even so it massively amplified the weak points of a space knight. Any enemy that managed to reach the rear would be able to inflict crippling damage to the mech! Such an easy vulnerability defeated the purpose of offering a defensive space knight.

"There shouldn't be too many compromises involved with the defensive capabilities of my design." He declared.

This problem haunted him for so long that the fleet finally transitioned into the Harkensen System before he knew it. The Tovar Peace Delegation successfully reached their destination, though not without suffering some losses!

As Ves accessed a local plot of the system, he found it to be as boisterous as his first visit to this Reinaldan star system.

Many shady outfits and outright pirate gangs frequented Harkensen III to unload their ill-gotten gains. They subsequently used the proceeds to procure new mechs, ships and supplies.

The outfits also deposited their crews on Harkensen I for some much-needed shore leave. The large-scale attacks the resort planet suffered a couple of years ago had already faded after the Reinald Republic made a concerted effort to repair the damage and promote it as an excellent vacation destination.

Ves smiled cynically at the high amount of traffic running through Harkensen I's orbit. To someone who lived through the devastation that wracked Harkensen I's surface, he found the sight to be surreal.

"People have such short memories."

Chapter 1038 Royal House of Vesia

As inspection corvettes from the Honored Ones arrived to search the new arrivals for threats, Ves met up with Lord Javier again in the lounge.

Lord Javier grinned at Ves. "This is it, buddy. Soon, you'll get to meet other Vesians besides me. I hope there are lots of Imodrissians among the Vesian delegation."

"Will there be?" Ves wondered. "I heard that a prince of the royal family will head the Vesian delegation. Won't they all come from the Royal Territory in the center of the Kingdom?"

"Sure, but the Royal Territory isn't as rich and powerful as the individual duchies." Javier explained. "There's only so much resources and manpower the Royal House of Vesia can draw upon within the only territory they control directly. It's a capital territory in isolation."

His remark emphasized the weak position of the Royal House of Vesia. The ducal houses who carved out the majority of the Vesia Kingdom's territories for themselves did their best to suppress the royals and their ambitions to rein in the largely unchecked nobility.

"If the Royal House is so weak, why is Senator Tovar negotiating with them in the first place?"

"If not the royals, who else?" Javier shrugged with a smile. "If they negotiate with one of the duchies, the other duchies would never accept that they upheld the interests of the entire state. Negotiating with all of the duchies at once is unfeasible. Not only would the peace talks become mired with infighting and irreconcilable differences of opinion, it also risks exposing the peace talks before they're ready to go public."

All of those arguments made sense to Ves. "So even though the royals are weak, that's also an asset to them because the duchies aren't afraid of them. At the very least, they are useful tools whenever the Kingdom needs to forge a consensus."

Diplomacy was one of the few areas where the various Vesian noble influences left to the royals. It would be far too chaotic and downright catastrophic if every single duchy of the Vesia Kingdom pursued their own diplomacy. By allowing the weak Royal House of Vesia to take charge of this

domain while simultaneously supervising every deal they negotiated, the duchies would not be forced to reject any proposed treaty just because their rivals presented it first.

"Have you heard which royal prince has agreed to represent the Vesia Kingdom in the upcoming peace talks?"

Lord Javier nodded. "Senator Tovar filled me in. The leader of the Vesian delegation is Prince Colchester. He's nearly as old as the senator at around 230 years old if I recall."

Ves hadn't heard of Prince Colchester before. Then again, he never needed to learn about the members of the Vesian royal family when he studied mech design.

"What is Prince Colchester known for in your circles?"

"Prince Colly is a bit of a boring member of the royal house." Lord Javier snorted with contempt. "He's not a mech pilot and never even bothered to serve in the Mech Legion. Instead, I heard he's highly respected in the field of economics. He used to be an economic planner who took part in huge decisions that affected the economy of the entire kingdom. I also heard that he's a bit conservative and restrained in many political matters."

"How so?"

"For example, Prince Colly is a big proponent of solidifying the class system. He thinks too many commoners are elevated into the nobility and he thinks it's ridiculous that it's too easy for the aristocracy to lose their status after going through a tough time."

Ves smirked. "I think his own interests and the interests of the royal house play a large part in his standpoint on this issue."

"The old prince also thinks we should scale back the intensity of our wars against the Bright Republic because the losses we've suffered are very heavy. He isn't making a lot of friends with that extreme opinion."

Only in a warmongering state like the Vesia Kingdom would moderation and restraint be considered extreme, Ves thought.

"So a prince like that is leading the Vesian delegation?"

"He's the most peace-loving idiot among the princes of the royal house. He doesn't have much credibility with the supporters of the war within the Kingdom, but as long as his entire house backs him up, he might stand a decent chance of smacking the duchies back into sanity."

While Ves doubted that the weak royal house could convince the duchies of stopping the war, Prince Colchester might surprise him, even if Lord Javier didn't think much of the old royal.

The fact that Lord Javier didn't bother to address the prince as 'his highness' or the like reflected the Vesian lack of respect for the royal family. Granted, they often skipped such styles of addressing each other except in formal circumstances.

Also, Ves doubted that Prince Colchester would like it if someone called him Prince Colly in his face!

"Is there any other advice you can give me before we land and attend the opening banquet?" Ves asked.

As a hostage, Lord Javier wouldn't be present at the first formal introduction between the two delegations. In fact, he wouldn't be showing up much at all in order to control how much he gave away to his fellow Vesians.

"You're a bigger deal than you realize, Ves." Lord Javier said seriously. "Try and flaunt the fact that you're Senator Tovar and Professor Ventag's pet."

Ves immediately frowned at such a ridiculous response. "Pardon?!"

Lord Javier just grinned in response. "I purposefully call you a pet, because that's what you are to them. A useful puppy that barks whenever they praise you and fetches the sticks they throw out. Don't feel insulted, Ves. In this setting, it's an advantage. The Vesians you'll meet during the peace talks are all nobles and elites that Prince Colly finds worthy enough to be a part of his delegation. They're mostly going to be older men and women just like the ones who are part of your own delegation. It's impossible for you to earn their respect on your own. However, as long as you're shameless enough, I think you'll be able to get in their good books by using the name of a renowned senator and Senior Mech Designer."

Even though Ves felt somewhat affronted at the thought of purposefully taking advantage of someone else's names and reputation, it did describe his current status somewhat accurately.

Ves reminded himself of Flashlight's tenets. It didn't matter what method he used as long as he fulfilled the mission. Right now, Senator Tovar expected him to make a favorable impression on the Vesians with his medals and war exploits and befriend at least some of them in the process.

"I hope you're not completely right and that they brought younger Vesians along as well." He said.

As Ves received some last-minute advice from Lord Javier, the fleet slowly made its way to Harkensen II. It took some days for the fleet to reach the administrative planet's orbit as the Honored Ones increased their scrutiny to any ships or fleets crossing into the restricted zone around the second planet from the local star.

If anything, Ves felt much more reassured that the Honored Ones prevented never-do-wells from smuggling dangerous weapons and mechs to the surface

of Harkensen II. The fiasco that Ves endured on Harkensen I a few years ago should not be making a repeat on this strictly-governed planet.

After a long period of inspections, identity verification and signing documents, a series of shuttles dispatched by the Reinaldians all brought them down to the surface of Harkensen II.

Only Senator Tovar and his aides were spared from riding Reinaldian shuttles. The senator received a waiver from the authorities to make use of his personal shuttle to make landfall.

Rank hath its privileges.

The general atmosphere at the spaceport at the outskirts of Ernos, the capital city, reminded Ves of Rittersberg. Lots of precisely-shaped greenery blended in harmoniously with predominantly white structures. This classic look granted Harkensen II the impression of an idyllic paradise.

In order to maintain the secrecy of the peace talks, the members of the Tovar Peace Delegation remained separate from the public. Their Reinaldian escorts from restricted area to restricted area before leading them to armored shuttles that brought them away from Ernos.

The capital city was too important and too highly-populated to conduct the peace talks. The Reinaldians along with the two parties instead decided to hold the peace talks at Kester Hills, a small settlement known for its bountiful nature and relaxing sites.

The fact that it was small and lightly-populated meant that it was easy to control its population. In fact, the Reinaldians temporarily relocated its citizens and stationed a robust amount of Honored Ones to ensure the security of the peace talks.

Ves still wondered why the Reinaldians played along in the first place. Shouldn't they be glad that the Brighters and Vesians continued to slug it out against each other?

He was not naive enough to believe the Reinaldians became convinced by Senator Tovar's claims that a greater threat might be coming.

Well, such concerns weren't very relevant to him. Senator Tovar had a good reason to agree with holding peace talks in the Reinald Republic.

As the armored shuttle landed in the landing zone of an expansive and luxurious-looking estate, the Reinaldians retreated their people and let the Brighters sort themselves out at their new abode. The Tovar Peace Delegation's staff immediately went to work. They inspected the main compound and inspected them for bugs and listening devices.

It was probably a guarantee that the Reinaldians snuck in loads of spying devices in the compound.

After a short moment, Secretary Lowe came up to Ves. "Mr. Larkinson, your quarters have been prepared. Please follow after me. We'll need to prepare you for the upcoming banquet tonight."

The diplomatic aide led Ves into the compound before reaching a residential section that offered hotel-like room to the guests.

As they entered one of them, Ves saw that his luggage had already been delivered. Secretary Lowe immediately walked up to the main closet and drew out a cross between a service dress uniform and a formal black tie dining outfit.

"What in the galaxy is this abomination?" Ves asked with irritation.

"It's your mess dress uniform." Lowe smiled. "It's also what you will be wearing for tonight."

A row of resplendent-looking medals had already been pinned to the front of the uniform. Obviously, ribbons wouldn't cut it for such a formal occasion.

The main reason why Ves felt repelled by the uniform was that it included an excessive amount of golden frills and lacing. It was as if the designer of the uniform was afraid that the person who wore it wouldn't be able to draw attention!

Secretary Lowe noticed Ves' discomfort. "It's not an embarrassment to wear this uniform. Mind you, many of your peers will wear much more impressive-looking outfits. The only distinguishing feature that stands out in your case are your medals. Many Vesians are quite well-versed in recognizing awards issued by the Mech Corps. With any luck, they will quickly come to learn that you are a war hero."

"It sounds like it's really important to hit that home."

"First impressions are critical. Considering the high stakes of these peace talks, we need every advantage that we can get. Therefore, the senator hopes that you will exert your best efforts in representing the Bright Republic in front of our Vesian counterparts. Your actions tonight will not only reflect on yourself, but also your patrons as well as your state. Do you understand?"

Ves nodded seriously. If the basic message was that if he screwed up somehow, he would be dragging down the reputation of Senator Tovar and the Bright Republic. Such a disaster would weaken their bargaining position.

"Don't worry Ves." Secretary Lowe patted his shoulder in reassurance. "You're a junior member of the delegation so you'll be sitting far away from the center where most of the attention will be drawn. Even if you poke your nose, the Vesians won't care."

Somehow, that didn't sound very reassuring at all to Ves. "I'll be sure to avoid poking my nose during the upcoming occasion."

Chapter 1039 Opening Banquet

The venue of the opening banquet took place in a majestic dining hall. Kester Hills was no stranger in providing service to members of high society, so the dining hall looked quite resplendent. The marble stonework and titanium-golden metalwork had all been fashioned into a clean and modern style that nevertheless did not become too abstract.

The design of the dining hall with its emphasis on space and geometric shapes provided a suitable backdrop for the guests to take the stage.

Every member of the Tovar Peace Delegation arrived in some of the best clothing that the senator's staff provided to each of them. Ves milled around in the periphery of Colonel Xelven and the other military officers.

All of them wore similar mess dress uniforms. The senior officers boasted much higher numbers of medals, badges and other awards.

If Ves was afraid he'd be overshadowed by the flood of decorations from the careerist military officers, he shouldn't have been worried. Some might carry a Torchbearer, others a Darkness Eater, but absolutely no one carried both at once! The extremely rare Golden Mech further signified that he was a mech designer, not a mech pilot!

His top awards had been designed to call out attention with the incorporation of shiny exotics and luminescent materials designed to simulate fire and light. The Golden Mech in particular caught a lot of attention due to its relative size and gaudiness.

The eclectic combination of medals already drew the attention of the other old men and women of the Tovar Peace Delegation. They had seen him walk around on the Felicitous Remembrance and the Lormant Carnival, but were not quite aware of what his ribbons on his service uniform represented back then. Now they realized that Ves may be more than met the eye.

Of course, Ves did not particularly care about impressing his fellow Brighters at this time. Instead, he along with everyone else faced the Colchester Peace Delegation.

As the formal introduction rituals went underway, Ves studied his opposites.

The first thing that struck him was that they made for an imposing image. A higher proportion of military officers made up their ranks. Some of the bureaucrats, statesmen, businessmen and even academics also carried the same air as their soldiers, signifying that they once served in the military as well!

The Vesians also seemed to group up amongst themselves. Unlike the Brighters who stood in a single, uniform row with equal spacing between them, the Vesians vaguely bunched up a bit into a handful of separate cliques.

Only a small number of them appeared to be the core confidants of Prince Colchester. The rest hailed from different duchies who distrusted those from other duchies.

Ves guessed that this continued division would complicate the peace talks once they finally commenced.

Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester both stood in the middle of their ranks. At some unspoken signal, they both walked forward until they arrived right in front of each other.

They studied each other.

Both old men experienced more than two centuries in their lives, and would live at least a century more. The vicissitudes of living all of those years reflected in their faces and their posture. They were no average humans in the galaxy. They were born from privileged families and had been groomed to lead their respective states since young.

Looking far away from the center, Ves became struck with the notion that they were the same kind of men. Both of them were leaders and both of them were old. That gave them something in common that none of the other members of their delegations could ever come close to matching!

"Prince Colchester."

"Senator Tovar."

They shook hands and smiled in diplomatic fashions. None of their true thoughts could be discerned as they tried to read each other's expressions and body language.

Eventually, they separated and led their delegations to the lengthy but narrow dining tables.

A band began to play soft music while staff started to bring in appetizers. However, no one focused on the food and drink and instead stared at the opposite side of the narrow tables where their Vesian counterparts took seats.

Ves sat a long line down the table for military officers and officials. Lieutenant Colonel Xelven sat at the head of the table and already started to swap some casual stories with a noble officer from the Mech Legion.

Everyone's ranks, seniority and age descended further down the table until only mere captains sat at the other end.

For various reasons, Ves sat at the other end of the table. The officer who sat next to him might be a mere mech captain, but he was at least twenty years older and of a very different breed from the more casual and approachable Vandals.

Ves instead turned his attention back to the Vesian military officers. He glanced at each member of the Mech Legion, trying to see if he recognized

any of them, all the way until he came at the end where he met a pair of burning eyes that tried to poke holes at him for some reason!

He blinked.

He stared at the face surrounding those eyes and belatedly realized he knew this woman!

"Venerable Foster! How can you be here?!" He asked with a somewhat alarmed tone.

He probably made a faux pas somewhere but his shock had overridden his senses!

The blond woman in front of him narrowed her eyes. "My apologies for disappointing your expectations, Mr. Larkinson. It seems we both survived our missions. It's very strange what happened to the vessel back then. I almost didn't make it out. Yet strangely enough I find you here. Out of the handful of people who survived the disaster back then, how can a puny mech designer like you possibly make it out unscathed? Did you have something to do with it perhaps?"

Ves laughed a little awkwardly, sweat already starting to pour down his brow. "I am not at liberty to discuss any details, let alone with a Vesian like you. Please mind our surroundings."

They were in a very public setting right now. Even if Ves received permission to discuss the details of the Aeon Corona Mission, he would never divulge any details to Venerable Foster just to satisfy his curiosity.

She was the enemy!

The other military officers noticed the tense dynamic between the two. They couldn't quite figure out why even though they shared some traits in common. One was a decorated mech designer. The other was a decorated expert pilot.

Both of them were roughly from the same generation and were younger than most members of their delegations.

Ves felt increasingly pressured as Venerable Foster brought more and more of her ire to bear on him. His Spirituality felt discomfited by her strong will. She was likely imagining killing him or something.

As the waiters delivered the dishes and drew back, some of the guests began to dig in. Ves immediately started to eat some sort of salad pâté made out of important exobeast liver to avoid her attention.

Unfortunately, Venerable Foster was just as capable of maintaining her acid gaze on Ves as she sampled the delicacies.

"If you think you can avoid me, Mr. Larkinson, think again."

There was something about her voice that forced Ves to look up to her again. Ves was vaguely aware that Venerable Foster must be unconsciously manipulating her very real spirituality in this manner. It was how expert pilots commanded attention and obedience from their lessers. He already experienced this effect from Venerable Xie, but only to a lesser degree.

However, compared to that weak expert pilot, Venerable Foster's will was much more pure and concentrated! Whenever she spoke, Ves pretty much felt her intentions and attitude. She was not the sort of person who camouflaged the meaning of her words or engaged in doublespeak.

She spoke bluntly and directly with no ambiguity. She was a woman who knew what she wanted, and that empowered her will into some sort of mental force field that aligned in the same cohesive directions like an electromagnetic field!

It was as if a contest of wills took place in a realm invisible to everyone but Ves. Perhaps because he possessed a tangle form of Spirituality, he was

actually more susceptible to this effect than a norm. He actively concentrated his mind in order to shield his Spirituality against submitting to her will.

Perhaps Venerable Foster noticed something about him, because she eased up on her invisible assault. "Looks like you're not a big of a wimp as you pretended to be back then. The Mech Corps isn't in the habit of awarding those medals of yours to wimps."

Ves smiled back in a strained fashion. Even if she became a bit more amiable for the moment, there was no doubt that she would rather stick a dagger in his stomach.

"How come you are a part of Prince Colchester's delegation?"

"Who says I can't represent both the Vesia Kingdom and the Hafner Duchy?" She replied mockingly as the next courses arrived. "I was introduced to the royal family through Lady Amalia of Imodris. Even though I love the Hafner Duchy and always consider it my home, expert pilots like myself ought to stand up for more than their own tribes."

Some of the Vesian officers sitting close by looked askance at her. It seemed her opinion did not play well with her colleagues in the Mech Legion. She showed no hint of reproach in her opinion, though. Even though she was still a mere mech captain, as a baroness and expert pilot she could damn say nearly whatever she wanted without repercussion!

This was the privilege of strength in a state which worshipped it to a much greater degree than the Bright Republic!

"What is your stance on the possibility of peace between our states?" He asked.

"Naturally, I support Prince Colchester's endeavors." She stated confidently.

"Even though I would like nothing but to vanquish the Mech Corps and overrun your entire state along with any other loyal Vesian, as a guardian of

the Kingdom I must take a wider perspective. Make no mistake, Brighter. The wars between our states will never end. Yet I also believe it shouldn't be a problem to put an extended pause in our conflict if it's necessary. Once we no longer have to be concerned about outside interference, we can immediately end our truce."

That was a very practical point of view, and the other officers near her couldn't help but nod in agreement.

Talk of permanently ending the conflict between their states was a bridge too far for most Vesians. Even the Brighters would feel uncomfortable. By phrasing the proposed peace as pressing the pause button, the two states would be able to maintain the stance that they remained hostile to their archenemies.

How long the proposed truce would last and whether both states would actually stick to its terms were still in question. The upcoming peace talks aimed to address these difficulties in order to see whether both sides could come to a reluctant accord that both states might be able to stomach.

The talk between the two became very stilted. While Ves and Venerable Foster both shared some of the same experiences and already knew each other, they both disliked each other intensely as well.

They just didn't have anyone else to talk with. Everyone else was older. Ves himself was a mech designer, which distinguished himself from the long-serving mech pilots and administrators. Venerable Foster in the meantime may be a highly respected expert pilot, but diplomacy did not come naturally to her. She never hid her animosity towards the Brighters and directly made her dislike for them known.

It was no surprise that the other Brighter officers did their best to ignore Venerable Foster's presence and engaged in conversation among their own peers.

As an unfortunate consequence of that, Venerable Foster kept turning her ire towards Ves throughout the banquet.

"You craven little mech designer. Don't look down at your food when I'm speaking to you. I won't let you get away for all the shenanigans you pulled off back then!"

Ves wanted to vomit blood. Why was she so fixated on him? What happened to her and the rest of the Vesian ground forces when Sigrund escaped from his cage?

Chapter 1040 Start of Talks

That evening, Ves finally returned to his quarters in the compound assigned to the Tovar Peace Delegation. While his stomach was filled with sumptuous food, his mind felt distressingly empty.

It took every bit of concentration and attentiveness to resist Venerable Foster's scathing remarks and accusations.

As Ves sat on his bed, he tried to figure out how she came to be here. From her various remarks, he got the sense that while she and some of her fellow Vesian officers managed to escape from Aeon Corona VII alive and with their mission objective, much of the Vesian ground forces failed to extract in time.

"The Hostland Warriors and the Meandering Monkeys demand an account from you!" She burst out once during the conversation, unintentionally spilling some information that she shouldn't have among unrelated people.

Not that anyone would punish her for it. She was a young and promising expert pilot who also earned a lot of merit in the Mech Legion.

That made Ves wonder if the recipient of the lockbox they managed to acquire was Prince Colchester.

"The prince still has at least seventy to a hundred years of life to go, but there's no harm in preparing for the future."

That might explain Venerable Foster's inclusion as a military attaché in the Prince's delegation.

Ves did not care too much which Vesian managed to enjoy an extended lifespan. Whether it was some duke or prince who enjoyed this privilege, what really mattered was how much recognition Venerable Foster received.

Evidently, she enjoyed a lot of favor. Despite her abrasive personality, Prince Colchester somehow saw fit to include her in his ranks. There must be multiple reasons why she was present here in Kester Hills.

"Are we really here to discuss peace talks, or is there more to these negotiations that they haven't told me?" Ves wondered.

Ves got the vague sense that Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester may be attempting to kill multiple birds with one stone. That seemed to be the modus operandi among the powerful and influential. They always aimed to fulfill multiple objectives at once.

The next day, the peace talks began in earnest. Both delegations sent representatives to make their opening moves. The talks took place at a formal conference chamber that offered large round tables, high ceilings with lots of light, and stuffy protocol that Ves didn't have the privilege to witness.

Only a handful of representatives from both sides met each other first so far. The conference chamber was closed off to every other person including Ves. Instead, he was expected to linger around at Kester Hills and strike up a conversation with some of the idle Vesian members of the delegation.

Ves had nothing in common with the Vesian dignitaries. It would be hard for him to approach them, especially since they were mostly at least as old as his parents. Both delegations mainly brought their powerhouses to the peace talks who were already familiar with the game.

"At least I'm out of yesterday's clown suit."

Now that everyone who served in the military showed off their decorations in full splendor, they returned to their more sober and business-like service dress uniforms.

The only exceptions to the rule had only been brought to the peace talks as afterthoughts. Neither Ves nor Venerable Foster became attachés of their respective delegations due to careful planning or strategic considerations.

Their patrons merely treated them like pets that they wanted to bring along in their holiday rather than leave them sad and alone in their homes. At least that was the sense that Ves constructed in his mind.

The lack of attention and expectation put on him also liberated him somewhat. Even if he sat down in the dirt and build sandcastles all day, no one would fault him very much.

However, Ves knew that doing nothing substantial would lower Senator Tovar's good impression on him. If he wanted to show that he remained an asset to the senator's circle, he needed to put some actual effort in his current assignment.

"Besides, what else can I do in this tiny retreat? There's hardly any entertainment out here."

Kester Hills normally served as a holiday retreat. The bountiful nature offered many opportunities for hiking, mountain climbing, kayaking and other primitive activities for overworked managers tired of being surrounded by technology all day.

Ves did have to admit that the locale gave a strong sense of peace and serenity to him. In fact, it reminded him of his native planet of Cloudy Curtain, except sunnier.

It was too bad that the Reinaldians relocated most of the workers facilitating those activities away for the duration of the peace talks. Kester Hills became an invisible prison to him, with guards dispatched by the Honored Ones imposing order in the halls and on the streets.

Some attachés already started to approach each other and engage in modest conversations. None of them lost their animosity towards each other, and not every conversation lasted long enough to forge some bonds.

Ves in the meantime switched his gaze back and forth between the gatherings of business magnates and military officers. Who should he approach first?

"It's too difficult to forge a business partnership between the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom." He considered for a moment. "Even if some collaboration can be forged between our two states, it won't be the likes of me who will get involved."

Yet he couldn't just walk up to a high-ranking Vesian military officer and swap war stories with each other. Most of what he experienced in his short tour with the Mech Corps consisted of highly classified missions that couldn't be divulged to anyone, least of all a Vesian.

Most of the advice Lord Javier had given him didn't put that much emphasis on generational differences. As long as Ves made a forceful impression, he'd earn their respect somehow.

As Ves considered how to elevate himself into a big deal in the eyes of the Vesians, a slim but surprisingly strong hand grabbed hold of the collar of his uniform and dragged him out of the street and against the side of the wall of an empty estate.

"Foster! What is the meaning of this?!"

"You aren't getting away this time." She hissed as she brought her furious will to bear on him. "One way or another, I'll beat the answer out of you of what happened at that time. The lives of thousands of Hostland Warriors and the Meandering Monkeys demand justice!"

This was the second time Venerable Foster grabbed his collar and manhandled him against a surface. The last time, Ves enjoyed little protection, so he didn't dare fight back.

This time was different. He narrowed his eyes and pushed back against Venerable Foster, both physically and spiritually.

Though he did not possess the ability to infuse his willpower with his Spirituality like an expert pilot, he nonetheless attempted to concentrate his Spirituality into a dagger and send it out to Venerable Foster.

The expert pilot winced a little, though she wasn't sure where the sting in her mind came from. During that brief interruption, Ves grabbed her hand that was grasping against his collar and wrung it away by using a greater fraction of his physical strength.

Fortunately, Venerable Foster expected to face a pushover, so she hadn't exerted that much strength at all. In fact, she seemed surprised that Ves had the guts to resist her moves.

Ves got the sense that people rarely said no to Venerable Foster ever since she advanced to expert pilot.

"Venerable Foster, please be conscious of our current surroundings. We are not on the battlefield anymore."

A foot patrol of Honored Ones already arrived at the side. An intimidating-looking exoskeleton soldier stepped forward. "Is there a problem here?"

"Hopefully not." Ves responded.

Venerable Foster snorted and drew back her hand from Ves. "I won't stir up any trouble... for now."

"Please be more mindful of the rules, Venerable Foster." The Honored One said with a hint of forced respect. There was no way he would piss off an expert pilot, even a Vesian one. "If you wish to discuss more sensitive matters, there are more appropriate venues in Kester Hills."

"Please guide us to one."

Ves found himself being led to a small, isolated courtyard. He reluctantly took a seat next to a quant round garden table with a pot of tea already prepared for them. He quickly poured himself some tea in his tiny glass and began to sip it for lack of anything better to do.

In contrast, Venerable Foster sat on her chair with a straight posture and continued to study Ves with her burning eyes. She obviously wanted nothing more than to confront Ves of his past actions on Aeon Corona VII, yet her current assignment as well as the ubiquitous presence of the Honored restrained her from doing what she wanted.

Even if she was one of the most promising expert pilots to emerge from the Mech Legion in recent times, she didn't call the shots at the moment. Before she became an expert pilot, she was a soldier, and obedience to Vesian authority had long been stamped in her psyche.

That left her with no opportunity to bring up the topics she really wanted to talk about. Hence the extended silence ever since they sat down at this table.

"So." Ves began after he took a few sips of his soothing lavender tea. He found it regretful that the hosts hadn't served them chamomile tea, but then again he couldn't have everything. "Look, I get why you're not very pleased to

see me right now. The feeling is mutual. However, our current bosses don't want us to make a scene. You agree with the goal of the peace talks, right?"

The expert pilot restrained her aggression to an extent and breathed deeply.

"Don't patronize me. I'm quite aware of what is necessary at the moment. I am very much capable of taking the big picture into account."

Ves doubted it, but it wouldn't be polite to mention that. Instead, he moved on.

"Let's just... talk. Try and find some common ground."

"Command ground? Us?" Venerable Foster reacted with a skeptical voice.

"There is hardly anything I want to talk about with you. I don't need to know my enemies better when they're destined to die at my hands."

This loathsome Vesian expert pilot made it really difficult for Ves to remain polite. He grit his teeth as he held his frustrations back. Why was he the only one of the two who tried to fulfill his diplomatic obligations?

He even believed the main peace talks might encounter fewer hindrances than his attempt at maintaining a cordial conversation with Venerable Foster!

"What happened to your Belisarius, by the way?"

"Lost." She replied unemotionally. "It went down with the ship. Which is definitely your fault somehow. I know it. I can smell it from your snivelling body."

Ves was secretly glad that Venerable Foster no longer had access to that ridiculously strong and powerful expert mech. The Hafner Duchy pumped so much Rorach's Bone in its construction that its loss would be extremely painful to them! Even if Foster managed to return with the mission objective in hand, the loss of such an extravagantly expensive mech still marred her evaluation!

"Perhaps next time you Vesians will have some sense and design a more efficient mech for you. Obviously you aren't very attentive at keeping the property of the state secure."

That was if Foster spoke the truth. He didn't rule out that she was lying in his face in order to misdirect the Bright Republic.

Still, Venerable Foster intensified her glowering, making her displeasure at those words plain to see. "You don't need to poke into my business. By the way, where has that woman you hung out with back then? Calabast is her name, right? I'm surprised she kept you alive after using you. Ordinarily, intelligence types like her prefer to dispose of their tools once they outlived their usefulness."

Ves smiled back at Foster. "Unlike a wasteful pilot like you who somehow lost a mech worth a literal fortune, not everyone is as sloppy as you. What the Hafner Duchy sees in you, I don't know."

The tension between the two intensified. If the peace talks progressed this way at well, then Ves didn't see much hope for an amiable resolution.