

### Chapter 1041 Wildcards

The first couple of days since the start of the talks passed uneasily. Everyone involved in the beginning stages stormed out of the conference room in anger or frustration as they failed to come to a common understanding on the first items on the agenda.

Sunny Kester Hills became wracked by a cloud of tension and uncertainty as neither side managed to make a breakthrough on anything.

Still, this was just the start. It wasn't so easy to force the Brighters and Vesians to agree on anything. Just getting them to sit in the same room without drawing out their weapons was already a win in everyone's eyes.

Unfortunately, some people noticed that he spent some time with Venerable Foster in the first day. Secretary Lowe dropped by his quarters just as he turned in for the night after a fruitless day where he tried to avoid Venerable Foster's odious company.

The expert pilot still wanted to confront him for his alleged misdeeds against her comrades.

"Secretary Lowe, what brings you here?"

"I've arrived with instructions for you, Mr. Larkinson." The diplomatic aide responded. "You have been spending time with Venerable Foster, correct?"

Ves narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "I have, though not entirely willingly. Are you aware that we once stood opposite to each other on the battlefield?"

"That is quite clear to both the senator and myself. While we are aware that you do not enjoy the best relations with the Vesian expert pilot, it is better to keep talking with her than doing nothing. In fact, Senator Tovar expressly instructed me to tell you that while you don't need to become friends with her, it would be beneficial if you manage to remain on speaking terms with her.

"You do know that she hates my guts, right?"

"Enemies don't have to set aside their difference to be on speaking terms, you know." Secretary Lowe replied in an airy tone. "The art of diplomacy also encompasses methods to smile at your enemy even if you wish for their demise."

"If you can't tell, I'm not versed in those methods. I'm a mech designer first and foremost. Give me a mech and I can tear it down and point out all of its weaknesses."

Lowe shook his head. "You will not be able to demonstrate your technical prowess during the peace talks. Professor Ventag is already responsible for matters concerning mechs. We have already explained our expectations for you. Make nice with the Vesians. If you can't manage that, just keep talking to them. The Vesians are very stubborn and predisposed against us. However, they've been invited by Prince Colchester to take part in the talks because they are more open-minded than many other Vesians."

Ves smiled sardonically at that remark. "I can hardly tell, considering how abundantly clear Venerable Foster makes her dislike for me known to all."

"Just like you, she is not a diplomat. None of us holds her to a higher standard in that regard. It is not that beneficial to have a delegation be made up of political and diplomatic animals. Sometimes bringing along a blunt object such as Venerable Foster can deliver the prince a pleasant surprise. She's a wildcard, just like you. There is no attaché in our delegation that is more fitting than you to interact with her. Your shared history with her might even prove to be an advantage!"

In other words, both delegations wanted to play their respective wildcards against each other and see what resulted from the ensuing confrontation. If a fight broke out, well, at least they tried. But the hope of making a breakthrough

and coming to some sort of accord, however fragile and tenuous it may be, gave both sides ample enough reason to encourage Ves and Foster to continue their interaction.

"How are the peace talks going?" Ves asked, wishing to divert to another topic rather than continue to hammer on the previous point. He had already resigned himself to meeting Venerable Foster once again. "I heard that they're not getting off to a good start."

Lowe shook his head in regret. "It is not an entirely unexpected outcome. Both sides need an outlet to vent their grievances. How can any gathering between Brighters and Vesians proceed without issue? Harsh feelings and clashing egos may be posing a hindrance right now, but the most surprising results may be achieved from heated moments. We are unlike soulless bots who can come to a consensus in a matter of nanoseconds, but our irrationality is also our greatest hope of temporarily reconciling two diametrically-opposed states."

Ves found that to be an interesting perspective. It made sense to him in a strange fashion, though it was easier said than done to achieve the impossible. It felt too much like the delegates just threw random stuff at a wall to see what stuck.

"I will try my best." He promised in a perfunctory manner even if he did not hold out much hope for a breakthrough. "I don't think Venerable Foster is eager for small talk with me, though."

"You don't need to be concerned that she will refuse to talk. If our expectations are correct, she will be receiving similar instructions to yours. Prince Colchester wants to establish peace just as much as Senator Tovar."

It would have been great if they could gather in the same room and hash out an agreement in a single afternoon. Both leaders and statesmen shared the same goal, after all.

Yet this kind of backroom deal would never be accepted by the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom. They at least needed the illusion that their interests had been taken into account when forging the deal. This was why both sides brought an extensive collection of attachés.

While establishing ties between the two sides was all fine and dandy, their main purpose in taking part was to bring any agreed-upon peace treaty back to their states and convince everyone to abide by the terms.

Someone respected like Venerable Foster would be able to display her true value then. Her identity as a young and rising expert pilot gave her a lot of clout, even if she seemed a little too impulsive to make deft use of it at the moment.

After Secretary Lowe passed on the messages that Ves needed to hear, he departed the quarters.

Ves idly stared at a wall in contemplation. How could he possibly stay on speaking terms with Venerable Foster? He doubted that all of the advice provided by Lord Javier applied in this case.

"Even if she's a baroness, she's no typical stuck-up Vesian noble."

Her bearing made it abundantly clear that she considered herself as a soldier of the Mech Legion first.

"Well, I'll see what happens tomorrow."

As Ves went to bed, he began to think back on his current design project. Even though a couple of days had passed, he still hadn't managed to overcome the most pressing issue concerning his vision for his next creation.

Not every mech concept was viable. Some mech designers commonly came up with several ideas and picked the most practical and profitable of them out of a selection of choices.

Should he give up his intention to design a defensive space knight and put the idea aside in favor of another idea?

"I'm not under any obligation to insist on designing a space knight. Every burden is brought about by myself. Only I'm to blame for becoming stuck with this problem."

Attempting to design a mech that recreated some of Qilanxo's majesty got his passion fired up like nothing else, but practicality continued to stand in his way.

Ves felt an enormous amount of frustration at this impassable hindrance. It was as if he possessed urges but no outlets to release them! How did other mech designers deal with this issue?

"They'll probably give up." He guessed. "An unattainable dream isn't worth pursuing when you'll only ruin yourself if you vainly try to pursue it. Every mech designer wants to design a great mech. That doesn't mean they have the funding and means to do so. Many of us aren't in a position where we can ignore practical constraints!"

Rationally speaking, he should have given up on the idea to design a defensive space knight that paid homage to Qilanxo as soon as he learned how unfeasible it was. Incorporating genuine shield technology was out of the question. Polarizing technology offered a more viable alternative, but even then it took up way too much space to fit comfortably in any medium mech design.

Yet Ves did not wish to give up. His passion kept burning and he would hate to put it out by abandoning this mech concept. Some part in him urged him to continue to work on his current idea. If he succeeded in designing a workable mech along these lines, the magnitude of his achievement might even be enough to propel him directly into the ranks of Journeymen!

"This joint design project is a turning point in my career. How can I walk back from the challenge for fear of practical concerns?"

Logic and emotion clashed against each other, and emotion won out. What was best for Ves did not necessarily match with what he really wanted. He believed that if he ever turned away from this idea, he wouldn't be able to regain his motivation which had reached its height right now.

"Sometimes, a mech designer has to lay down their foot and pursue their passion despite the entire galaxy being arrayed against it. There must be some way of overcoming the problem."

The polarizing module simply took up too much mass and volume. I was too big compared to the capacity of a regular space knight. Trying to fit such a component into a mech without sufficient space was like trying to stuff his head into a sock.

He took a step back and contemplated the problem at its most basic level.

"My head is too big and my sock is too small. What can I do to make my head fit into my sock?"

Two answers immediately came to mind. The first answer was to shrink his head.

Ves chuckled a bit at the thought. "That's impossible."

His head, and the polarizing module for that matter, came in a given set of dimensions. The developers of the polarizing module already tried their best to minimize their volume and mass. There was no way Ves could ever shrink that even further.

Therefore, he moved on to the second answer. That was to enlarge his sock to a size that would just be able to slip over his head.

That sounded fine and dandy in this funny metaphor, but when Ves came back to his mech concept, that basically meant increasing the size of the mech frame!

"The space knight doesn't have to be as large of a heavy mech, but it will already be well beyond the boundaries of a medium mech by the time it is able to fit the polarizing module!"

Ves performed a series of mental calculations in his mind. He estimated that his space knight needed to surpass the size of a regular space knight that already pushed against the limits of the medium weight class by about twenty percent.

This essentially made his proposed mech concept at least twenty percent oversized and overweight!

"It's essentially an obese medium mech!"

From a conventional perspective, a fat mech did not offer any good performance. A medium mech that was too large and heavy didn't possess the mobility to dodge incoming fire and didn't possess the resilience to withstand it head-on for long.

Yet... did this rule of thumb actually apply in this case?

"I automatically thought it does out of habit, but is that really the correct assumption to apply in this situation?"

Even if he designed fat medium mech, did that really detract from core functionality of his space knight? From the start, it was mainly intended to serve a defensive role. A mech did not depend too much on mobility anyhow.

The real question was whether the tradeoff in mobility would be worth the gains in defensive ability.

"Cost is also a major issue." Ves recognized. "A mech that's twenty percent larger is at least twenty percent more expensive. Will anyone still be willing to buy one? I have to offer a compelling reason for people to buy my mech. What can my mech do that most defensive knights can't do as well?"

#### Chapter 1042 Narrow Use Cases

A week went by as the peace talks made glacial progress. The cultural differences as well as the acrimonious dislike for each other prevented the Brighters and Vesians from getting along.

Both of them knew that they needed to forge some sort of bond at Kester Hills, but it was easier said than done to make friends with your worst enemies.

The tense, silence-prone meetings that Ves held with Venerable Foster went no better.

While Ves was rational enough to acknowledge his dislike for the Vesians but set it aside, Venerable Foster was remarkably stubborn in her animosity towards Brighters. It didn't help that she disliked Ves in particular for his involvement in the Aeon Corona Mission.

She held grievances. A lot of grievances. From her scattered remarks, Ves inferred that just like the Flagrant Vandals, the Hostland Warriors and the Meandering Monkeys suffered huge losses in their landbound and spaceborn ranks.

The abrupt shutdown of the Starlight Megalodon's FTL drives, Sigrund's unshackling and the mobbing of all the errant sandman motherships stranded in the star system all caught the Vesians off-guard.

If the Vandals already lost a huge amount of mechs and ships, then how could the Vesians be any different?



While Ves conceded that he might be partially responsible for the losses incurred by the Vandals and Vesians, it was a hectic and confusing time back then. He couldn't have achieved a better outcome unless he knew about Sigrund's threat beforehand, which he didn't. The hybrid sandman AI fooled everyone who took the bait, and now this rampant entity was loose in the galaxy.

Sigrund should have earned Venerable Foster's ire, but her lack of awareness about him led her to turn her attention to Ves instead.

He couldn't say he enjoyed the attention even if it let him remain within her company.

On her end, Venerable Foster likely couldn't get used to how Ves easily ignored her force of will and presence. She wasn't the first expert pilot he met and wouldn't be the last. His time with the Larkinsons already disabused him of his hero worship for expert pilots, and her considerable spiritual pressure only splashed uselessly against his concentrated mind.

It became evident that Venerable Foster became increasingly puzzled by how inscrutable Ves behaved in her presence. She had never met a young mech designer who resisted her presence so nonchalantly.

Half of the time, Ves allocated his thoughts to something other than the current gridlock. He constantly refined the vision of his space knight in his mind. He considered several different possibilities, but he couldn't get away from designing a super-medium mech if he wanted to fit in a bulky and heavy polarizing module.

When Ves managed to catch up with Professor Ventag, he finally described the radical idea that formented in his mind.

To his credit, Ventag didn't laugh at him in his face. Even so, he did not look favorable on the idea.

"Mr. Larkinson, you are not the only person who toyed with designing a super-medium mech. Let's take a step back and consider this unusual class. Do you know why mech designers avoid designing super-medium mechs?"

Ves nodded and gave the standard answer. "Mechs that exceed the mediumweight class but don't match the heavyweight class are too weakly-armored to withstand an extended bombardment and don't have enough mobility to dodge it either."

"So what makes your super-medium mech concept special that it can ignore these rules?"

"The custom against designing a super-medium mech is just a guideline. In the past, mech designers didn't worry about categorizing their mechs in three weight classes. While there is a good reason to adhere to the three weight classes, there are limitations to this paradigm. They constrain our thinking and prevents us from accepting the most appropriate solutions even if they stare at us in the face."

Professor Ventag smiled and crossed his arms as he leaned back in his chair in the courtyard. "You have a critical mind. I like it. Questioning assumptions and established theory is the mark of a mech designer with an aptitude for research. Those are very necessary traits for higher-ranking mech designers, but it is rather unusual for me to see them in an Apprentice. You are ahead of your peers in that regard."

"Thank you, sir."

"That said, inquisitive Apprentices sometimes question assumptions too early in their career. Before you break the rules, make sure you understand their necessity. Now tell me what your super-medium space knight concept offers that regular medium space knights lack."

"Well, you see, sir, I made some calculations..."

Ves activated his comm and showed off his scribblings, his loose calculations and his sketches. While he hadn't drafted a complete design as of yet, he toyed with various sketches of super-medium mechs that somehow incorporated the large polarizing module.

"This sketch shows the most feasible approach so far." Ves described as he showed off his latest sketch. It kind of looked like an obese mech. "The thick girth of this mech may look unwieldy, but the design is only roughly twenty-five percent larger than a typical medium defensive space knight. It features strong limbs, a large and sturdy torso and a tall tower shield."

"What is the use of such a mech?"

"It's purely allocated for defense. In exchange for giving up the ability to move fast in space, it offers much higher defense. While its mobility is severely constrained compared to regular medium space knights, some outfits never make full use of the mobility of this mech type anyway. Think about security companies or mercenary corps that are contracted to escort trade convoys. When pirates attempt to raid the convoy despite the presence of guards, possessing a super-medium mech that can take a substantially greater beating than regular space knights will help shield the vulnerable trade ships from collateral damage."

"I don't hear anything that a cheaper, more normal-sized medium space knight can do as well. You will have to offer more in order to convince the market and I of the merits of your concept, Mr. Larkinson."

"It's more cost-effective." Ves pushed another angle. "Even though my mech will be twenty-five percent larger and thus at least twenty-five percent more expensive, the defensive prowess it gains in turn would be increased as well. Its larger size and power means it has more surface area for its armor plating. This allows it to perform its core function for quite a bit longer."

"A mech that is twenty-five percent larger won't be twenty-five percent more durable." Professor Ventag said as he shook his head. "Concentrated fire on a single section of your mech will allow enemies to punch through its armor and cripple it without wasting their firepower on the rest of the mech. Its low mobility will only increase the effectiveness of this tactic."

"Ah, but this is where the polarizing module comes in. Once it comes online and charges the sections of the armor plating with the effect, it can temporarily shield the targeted section on its exterior against enemy fire! It's particularly effective against laser beams which boasts the highest degree of accuracy in space battles! As for slower ballistic projectiles, their travel time is just long enough that my super-medium mech will still be able to move and cause them to miss their mark."

This time, Professor Ventag furrowed his brows as he simulated Ves' arguments in his on mind. At first, he was dismissive of the radical idea of employing a super-medium mech. Yet the uses envisioned by Ves made a lot more sense!

The Senior looked increasingly more intrigued as he contemplated the intended use. "I admit, your idea sounds more plausible than the minute. However, are you aware of how difficult it is to implement such localized polarization into your design?"

The polarizing module ordinarily polarized the exterior of the entire mech against damage. However, this wasn't very efficient as the polarizing field wasted lots of energy just by remaining active. The larger the field, the more energy the mech expended.

Therefore, more advanced use of polarizing technology sought to reinforce smaller portions of a mech. However, this demanded a lot out of a mech designer. The polarizing field needed support from the internal architecture to

sustain its effects, and therefore required space to integrate special channels leading up to various sections of the mech.

The smaller and more granular the polarizing effect, the more channels required, taking up valuable space and increasing the complexity of the mech's internal architecture!

However, Ves was nothing if not confident in his own abilities. "I believe in my mech concept. Let me at least try before we rule it out. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised at the results."

"I'm not quite convinced by the appeal of your mech just yet." Professor Ventag frowned again. "The polarizing module itself expends a lot of energy. Even if you are able to add more energy cells into your enlarged design, I can't see your mech sustaining the effect more than ten minutes. Is that truly sufficient to be worth purchasing?"

Ves nodded gravely. "My space knight won't earn any endurance awards. Most battles don't last that long, I think. In most cases, the armor of a space knight will get worn away long before their energy cells are drained. Also, think of it this way. The mech pilot of my space knight isn't just limited to polarizing its armor reactively against precision fire. It can also spread the effect over its shield or its armor and absorb enemy fire without sustaining material damage."

"Why does that matter?"

"It's more cost-effective in shorter engagements. Any battle that space knights are involved in results in material damage to their shields or exterior armor plating at the very least. It not only takes money to replace or repair the armor plating, it also consumes a decent amount of manpower and time to do so. Think of treasure hunting fleets venturing out in the frontier. When pirates learn of their whereabouts, they'll trickle in and harass the treasure hunters

frequently in order to wear them out. In such an instance, rather than taking armor damage, wouldn't it be better to let the polarizing field absorb much of the damage instead in these low-intensity engagements? The only damage my space knight will sustain is a couple of depleted energy cells."

Ves came up with such a use due to his own personal experiences with the Flagrant Vandals. His stint as head designer made him intimately familiar with all of the headaches that emerged whenever the Vandals survived a battle. Even when they won, it was a huge hassle and drain on resources to repair the damaged mechs.

"I think... these cases sound plausible." Professor Ventag conceded, before playing devil's advocate again. "Still, these scenarios are very narrow and specific. A normal space knight may not offer any advantages in those specific scenarios, but it offers a lot better performance outside them. Your space knight is very inflexible. Its lack of versatility in other types of engagements will heavily impact its appeal."

"That's a tradeoff that I'm willing to take." Ves smiled. He made peace with this consequence. "Frankly, I don't believe the demand for my super-medium space knight will be so low. How many convoys are there these days? How many space knights are anchored to space stations and other fixed facilities in space? This is a substantial niche market in my eyes! I don't think there are many mechs at all that fills this niche as well as my super-medium space knight!"

Ventag wasn't taken in by his optimistic projection. "That's a very bold assumption of you. Yet how will the market really respond to such a deviant mech type? Have you ever thought of the possibility that the market will be prejudiced against your design solely due to its aberrant weight class? Have you ever factored in the backlash that both our companies will incur if we publish such a controversial mech design?"

"Backlash?" Ves puzzled.

### Chapter 1043 Dare to Design

"You have no idea how preconceptions run deep in the mech market." Professor Ventag stated. "First, think about the meaning of the word 'market'. It's a gathering of people who exchange goods and services to each other. The key word here is people. Without people, mechs won't get produced and sold. And while people can act somewhat rationally at the macro level, they are not devoid of bias."

A light went on in Ves' mind. He remembered the Skull Architect ranting against the imperfections of the mech market one time. The fugitive Senior Mech Designer once railed against some of the biases as well!

"So what you're saying is that because people have learned that super-medium mechs are a bad idea, they'll automatically be predisposed against my mech concept?"

"It's worse than you think, Mr. Larkinson. They'll take the initiative to disparage your product to their friends and on the galactic net. The negative feedback that will ensue as soon as we publish such a mech will impact our personal reputation and the reputation of our companies severely. It's fine if you decide to stray off the beaten path and ignore the rules that have been in place for centuries. Not everyone is as open-minded, however. Your design becomes a major problem when you impose your eccentric decisions on the market."

As much as he hated it, Ves knew that Professor Ventag might be right about the mech market's intolerance for his deviant design.

Yet... did that discourage him from pushing through with the concept he came up with? No. This the only practical way to implement his vision for a mech that emulated Qilanxo's defensive prowess to a degree. He felt passionate and motivated in making this vision come to life, to the point where he

suspected that he might even be able to advance to Journeyman on the spot as soon as he completed the design!

He only felt so good about his mech designs a couple of times. Such a feeling of hope and certainty was hard to come by, and Ves knew he wouldn't be nearly as passionate if he was forced to discard his current vision and start over from scratch.

He was emotionally invested in the vision he came up with! Although provoking a backlash sounded rather bad to Ves, he was still young and he could afford to make some blunders early in his career.

Yet it was an entirely different when it came to someone older and more established such as Professor Ventag and NORA Consolidated. His company spent decades building up its brand as a trusted indicator for quality mechs. If NORA became tied to his controversial mech design, it would incur much greater reputational damage, to the tune of missing billions of credits in monthly sales perhaps!

"Do you recognize my dilemma?" Professor Ventag asked with a smile.

"There is a large risk in becoming involved in such a controversial mech design. In my eyes, the costs outweigh the benefits. From a marketing standpoint, it does not make any sense to incur a substantial backlash and depress the sales of my other products in order to introduce a risky new concept to the market with uncertain sales potential."

"So you disapprove?"

"I do. My company will not want to be involved in your radical mech design. The damage to our reputation is simply too severe."

Ves hunched over in defeat. Those were very compelling reasons why they shouldn't design a super-medium mech. Would he really have to discard this



groundbreaking mech concept? Perhaps he could still save this idea for later and develop it on his own rather than involve a Senior.

Half a minute later, the professor smiled at Ves. "However... are you really so resigned to let our companies and the market dictate which mechs we ought to design?"

"Professor?" Ves asked with a puzzled tone.

"I can tell you believe in your mech concept. The logic behind it isn't bad either. So from a technical and design standpoint, your current ideas have merit. This will insure at least some sober mech buyers will see the appeal in the product. If we hold some highly-targeted marketing campaigns, we might be able to break even at the very least."

"Even so, breaking even will not undo our other losses." Ves recognized.

"If the market reacts as I predict, you may be right. Yet your thinking is too narrow. Our gains and losses aren't confined to reputation and finances."

The professor leaned back in his chair as he let Ves work out the meaning behind his hint.

Half a minute passed as Ves parsed the greater meaning. "Are you saying.. there may be other benefits?"

"I am. First, let us consider your personal benefits. What price are you willing to pay to advance to Journeyman? Many mech designers never catch the impetus that is required to make the jump. They are too timid and not confident enough in their design philosophy to proceed with designing the mechs that conform to their beliefs. They are too concerned about practical constraints and the reaction from the market to take a bold step forward. In your case, I have a very good feeling about your progress if you proceed with this vision of yours."

Ves nodded. "I feel so as well."

"That alone makes this project worthwhile for you. Sometimes, a mech design doesn't have to make sense to benefit you. Companies rise and fall all the time. In the worst case, your company might go bankrupt. Is that so awful? As long as you successfully advance to Journeyman immediately or shortly after publishing the design, you can enter the mech industry again from a much higher vantage point. There are always investors willing to provide seed money to get a Journeyman back in business."

While Ves did not wish for the LMC to flounder, Ventag was right that it wouldn't be impossible to start anew. The damage to people's livelihoods would be very large, though. He would also suffer other repercussions. He wanted to avoid such a destructive outcome, if only to keep his power base on his home planet secure.

"What about you, professor? Will you be able to benefit personally as well?"

"I have some ideas. You've inspired me, Mr. Larkinson." The professor smiled amiably. "Are you aware of my specialty?"

It took a short time for Ves to remind himself of that fact. "You're specialized in damage control. Your mechs have a greater capacity for withstanding damage!"

NORA Consolidated's mech catalog featured products that possessed a higher average of redundancy and compartmentalization than its direct competitors. Even without the use of thicker armor or more expensive materials, their mechs were always able to survive one or two more hits while other mechs would have collapsed already!

"My specialty does not specifically favor any particular mech type. Whether I'm designing a knight mech or a rifleman mech, I can improve upon both of them when it comes to absorbing damage and maintaining their functionality

even when their armor has been breached. However, the most significant aspect of my specialty is that the more room I have to work with, the more I can express my advantages."

Ves lit up at that. Basically, Professor Ventag's strong point was designing an exquisite internal architecture for a mech!

There wouldn't be much for him to tweak when it came to lean and narrow light mechs. Yet larger mechs offered much greater internal volume. This amplified the possibilities at Ventag's disposal.

While a heavy mech would be ideal for him to showcase his talents, a super-medium mech still offered distinct advantages compared to regular medium mechs. It wasn't much of a detriment for Professor Ventag to work on a super-medium mech design!

"I admit that I have long adhered to the rigid division of weight classes." Professor Ventag said regretfully. "I truly wish I possessed some of your open mindedness. I have never truly participated in the design of a super-medium mech. The thought simply hasn't entered my mind, and without a logical and compelling mech concept like yours, I would have never come up with a reason to do so. What Seniors like me fear the most is stagnation and running out of viable ideas. So believe me when I state that I will make some definite gains in my own research if I work with your mech concept. That is worth the damage to our reputation and our earnings."

"So.. reputation and money are just resources for us to expend in order to advance our ability to design mechs?"

The professor nodded in approval. "That's the right mindset you should take. There are some who take it too far, but the best mech designers are those who pursue their own interests rather than pay an undue amount of deference to market demand and public opinion. It is never a bad idea to explore and

apply your design philosophy in greater detail even if it sets back your business career. An Apprentice is an Apprentice. A Journeyman is a Journeyman. The two are so vastly different that there is no comparison between their value."

While Ves got his point, he still couldn't quite get over the consequences to their reputation and earnings. He also noted another point of concern. "Our reputation is vital to keep our backers and allies content, right? If we drag down our own reputation, will our supporters still be so generous to us?"

This was a very real concern for NORA Consolidated because it possessed strong ties to the Tovars and Rittersberg. As for Ves, his principal backer was Flashlight, an organization who ruthlessly pursued their goals regardless of their means. If Ves tanked his own company somehow, he would be going against their pragmatism by reducing the value of his company.

If Ves advanced to Journeyman, he could make up for the losses somehow, but if he didn't then Flashlight wouldn't be pleased.

"That is indeed a very serious concern." Professor Ventag conceded. "Yet it is not as bad as you think. Innovation has a price. Innovation can also shape your reputation in other ways, not all of them bad. If you become known to produce innovative designs, even if they have mixed results, the few successes you've achieved will be sufficient to make up for your flops."

"So if I keep designing these kinds of mechs, the market will get used to my eccentricities?"

"Correct. By starting with experimenting on unusual design concepts, you build up a tolerance in your reputation for designing mechs that do not completely conform to current market demand. That is a useful trait to acquire because it allows you to get away with mistakes more often. It can become a

key part of your brand! Any backers you have will be much more pleased with that outcome because it is so rare in the mech industry."

The professor's explanations were very high-minded, but Ves was sincerely convinced by the professor's answers. Everything had a price, but innovation was never easy. Advancing up the ladder should be the core focus of every mech designer!

Ves was surprised that Professor Ventag maintained such a strong focus on advancement. He thought that the Senior had lost himself into his political games, but it turned out he maintained a sober mind with regards to his associations with the Tovars, the DCTI and Rittersberg.

"Dare to design." Ventag summed up his point. "Money and reputation are the end goals of vulgar, short-sighted mech designers who will never advance beyond the Novice and Apprentice stages. If you follow market trends to a religious degree, all of your designs will only follow the crowd and be lost among the competition."

"A true mech designer isn't afraid of setting market trends instead of following them like a sheep!" Ves remarked.

With Professor Ventag's encouragement and support, Ves decided to adopt his current mech concept of a super-medium space knight for their joint design project. They refined his concept even further in their subsequent discussion.

Although the professor needed to return to the talks in order to provide expert council to the negotiators, Ves returned with high spirits. The risk of incurring backlash from the market no longer concerned him that much. Even if he received a flood of criticism, it would all be worth it if he advanced to Journeyman before he reached his thirties.

## Chapter 1044 Sword of Damocles

Ves made a lot of progress on refining his vision for his super-medium space knight the last few days. Ever since he received Professor Ventag's feedback and assistance, he tinkered with his vision in order to assure himself that his concept would perform well enough to attract actual market demand.

"Dare to design."

This motto stuck with Ves. It resonated with him. It sounded like the words of a true mech designer, one that was bold enough to design mechs.

"Even so, innovation comes with a price." He said to himself in a depreciating manner. "If it was so easy to buckle the predominant trends in the market, then a lot more mech designers would have already published a large bunch of super-medium mechs and other whacky designs."

Perhaps intentionally or unintentionally, Professor Ventag severely downplayed the negative consequences of pursuing innovation. The Senior painted a rosy picture of the benefits of pushing through with their innovative design, yet would the future really play out as the man described?

"It's impossible to predict the future!" Ves believed. He was not so arrogant to the point of claiming to predict how the market and everyone else with a stake in him and his company would respond to this design. "The backlash might be even greater and more enduring to someone like me than someone with a rock-solid reputation like Ventag."

Corus Ventag designed so many great mechs that he wouldn't be suffering that much of a hit to his reputation when he acquired a single blemish. As for Ves, while it was true that the market would forgive him for his missteps since he was so young, it would be hard to regain his old height after proving to the market that he was fallible like many other average mech designers.

In addition, mech designers defied the market at their own risk. What is his super-medium space knight design acquired such a negative reputation that even those willing to give it a try would be turned off?

Ves feared that all of the criticism would depress the sales of his design and thereby limit its proliferation in the Bright Republic and the Komodo Star Sector.

A mech designer derived a large part of their satisfaction and motivation on how widespread their designs proliferated. A struggling Novice who worked months or years on a single design, only to sell ten or so copies in its lifetime would feel as if their work hardly mattered.

He already learned that the impact of a mech designer's work affected a mech designer's chances of progressing and advancing.

Someone who designed a dozen virtual mechs a year likely wouldn't be able to match the progress of someone who designed only a single mech a year. That was because their concrete impact on society differed hugely, with the designer of the real mech directly affecting the state of the galaxy in a small but very real fashion.

"An artist does not produce art for their own enjoyment. Art is made to be shared and appreciated. The same applies to mech design."

Someone could train for hundreds of years to be the best painter in the galaxy, but what was the point if they hoarded their art and stuffed them in the closet? Besides, who knew if he was really the best if he didn't showcase his work to the public and listen to feedback?

Without going through the rigors of public exposure, art held little meaning!

"Mech designers design mechs because they are meant to be used. If the mechs we design don't fulfill this essential purpose, what is the meaning of

their existence? There isn't any. It's no surprise that mech designers who can't even find the meaning of their own designs stall in their growth."

Naturally, the presence and absence of spirituality played a role as well, but even so, if the joint design project sold less than a hundred copies in its lifetime, it wasn't a worthwhile mech design to Ves and Professor Ventag.

He was aware that many mech designers would be happy at selling more than a dozen copies of their mechs. Not Ves. Not anymore. "The sales figures of my Blackbeak and Crystal Lord designs are much higher than that. There should be no good reason for me to regress to the level of a struggling Novice."

No. Ves wanted to move forward and close the chapter of his life as an Apprentice.

However, in order to advance to Journeyman, his mech design needed to possess sufficient appeal that it attracted a sufficient amount of sales even under a storm of criticism!

The stakes of the joint design project was already high. By deciding on designing a super-medium space knight, Ves made the risky gamble even riskier by making a leveraged bet!

If he won this bet and achieved success despite the inevitable backlash he incurred, then all of the pain would have been worth it as he rode the high tide of innovation to Journeyman and beyond!

On the other hand, if he lost this bet, he not only wasted a priceless opportunity to collaborate with a Senior Mech Designer, he also risked tanking his company and set back his business aspirations!

Ves did not forget about his intention to participate in the upcoming rat race to design mechs for the upcoming generation as soon as it began!



"If I avoid excessive risks, I'm sure I can scrounge up a decent amount of money in time."

Yet Ves found this course of action to be distinctly appealing. Playing it safe may offer greater security, but where was the excitement in that? The Larkinson in him favored making bold moves, and venturing into the unknown conformed with the values of higher-ranking mech designers.

"A conventional mech designers merely follows the market trend. A great mech designer sets the market trend."

Naturally, the latter also needed to possess the right judgement to know when it was a good idea to go off the beaten path. Someone who recklessly designed weird mechs with little consequence on how the market would react to them would inevitably go broke and bankrupt.

Also, sometimes a mech designer might go too far in their pursuit of the unconventional. The Skull Architect's example came to mind. That man possessed a brilliant mind and an admirable attitude towards research, but he also had a few screws loose in his head.

Ves did not relish becoming as unhinged as the Skull Architect in his desire to push the boundaries of existing conventions.

Even so, such potentially extreme outcomes did not deter his adventurous spirit. Ves deeply wanted to fulfill his vision of designing a mech that paid homage to Qilanxo! The high stakes involved with this course of action only piled up the pressure on him, making him more serious yet more passionate than ever before!

"This is my most significant mech design to date! As long as everything goes right, even the Blackbeak and the critical Crystal Lord pales in comparison to the impact of this joint design project!"

As he continued to work over his vision in his mind during the following days, his good mood stood in stark contrast to the depression that enveloped Kester Hills.

The negotiations hadn't gone well at all. No progress had been made at all. In fact, the relations between the Tovar Peace Delegation and the Colchester Peace Delegation even regressed into an even greater degree of mutual dislike!

"I've been a bit distracted lately so I haven't been following the negotiations." Ves said to Secretary Lowe when the diplomatic assistant made his regular visits. "Why is everyone staring daggers at each other?"

Lowe sighed. "It's a complicated issue. Since you've recently been stationed on Bentheim, surely you must be aware of how the Vesians pushed into the Bright Republic with the express aim of taking the fight directly into our port system. This is a risky strategy that they've pursued in this edition of the war. The Vesians already paid a heavy price to push in so deep and the invasion forces are constantly at risk of getting cut off. However, the threat of attacking the Bentheim System is in itself a potent tool in the negotiations. Like brandishing a Sword of Damocles over our heads, the Vesians aren't shy about alluding to severe devastation and ruin on the Bright Republic's most important economic center should they fail to get what they want out of the negotiations."

Now he could see why relations dipped below freezing point. Ves knew that the fear of such a direct invasion was real among Brighters. "How did our side respond?"

"They downplayed the threat of the invasion and maintain a belief that the Vesians wouldn't actually dare to go through. Invading the Bentheim System comes with severe repercussions. It might not be the Mech Corps that will

lose out in a direct against the Mech Legion. However, the Vesians have a potent retort to any attempts at downplaying the threat."

"The Bentheim Liberation Movement." Ves guessed. "They're a threat as well, and in implicit coordination with the Vesians. If they are preparing for a major attack from within, Bentheim might not be able to repel the Vesian invasion so easily!"

An attack from within and without would definitely devastate Bentheim like nothing else! Even if the Mech Corps managed to repel the Mech Legion with great difficulty, they would only encounter ruins if they turned around.

If Bentheim became ruined, the trade and industry that took place there would take a huge hit! Money would stop flowing and the entire star system along with the rest of the Bright Republic would suffer severe shortages that would ripple into the daily lives of many average Brighters!

In short, the entire Bright Republic would bleed if the Tovar Peace Delegation recklessly called the Colchester Peace Delegation's bluff!

Secretary Lowe illuminated their current difficulties. "The main problem our negotiators are facing right now is our inability to ascertain whether the intention to invade the Bentheim System is a bluff or an actual plan. The lack of information on the Vesian bottom line is casting uncertainty on the stance we should take. Should we stay confident and implacable and risk devastation, or should we concede and give up ground?"

"What do the Vesians demand in return for calling off their supposed invasion of the Bentheim System?"

"A lot. More than double of the territory they gained when they gained the upper hand in the previous wars. Perhaps two-dozen star systems in the border region will change hands. That is on top of the monetary compensation that we have to provide. They're asking for a quarter of Bentheim's tax

revenue for the next decade. Absurd! That is enough money to drown their noble throats a million times over! The Bright Republic would definitely suffer under a long-term depression if they relinquish that much income!"

Ves did not have a clue how many bright credits all of this was worth, but he doubted the LMC came close to matching those figures in their annual earnings. His little company was only a drop in a bucket compared to the sheer amount of money the state raked in every year!

"With such a heavy price, I think we'd rather call their bluff and fight it out."

"That is the response of most of our delegation and I suspect the rest of the Republic." Secretary Lowe shook his head. "Yet that is exactly what Senator Tovar wishes to avoid. He isn't keen on weakening the Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom only to allow third parties to pick up a bargain. I believe Prince Colchester knows this as well, but he won't be able to placate the warmongers from his own state by proposing a white peace. If he can manage to secure significantly more gains through negotiations than the Mech Legion can secure an advantage in the war if they fight it out, then most of the Vesians will be able to stomach an early end of the war."

That in turn would piss the Brighters off so much that they would rather continue the war, thereby making the peace treaty enforceable!

The current conundrum between the two delegations remained an implacable obstacle in the peace talks. Without resolving this difficult hurdle in a way that was acceptable to both sides, perhaps the peace talks might meet a premature end before they even came close to achieving success!

#### **Chapter 1045 Intractable**

The Sword of Damocles the Vesians dangled over Bentheim threw the entire peace talks into a very precarious phase. As long as no one could manage to find a way to resolve the deadlock acceptable to both parties, they could forget about making other agreements.

A small mech designer like Ves could offer no input at all in such a high-stakes game of chicken. Right now, Ves somewhat felt that the current standoff tested each other's patience. The side who conceded first lost out or something like that.

Discussions still went on as each side tested the limits of the other. They frequently descended into overexaggerated shouting matches.

Ves barely noticed the deteriorating situation in Kester Hills. His head was up in the clouds as his inspiration ran amuck in his mind. He continued to sketch the vision of his mech, refining its overall shape and picking and choosing what attributes he wanted to emphasize.

In a break from his previous methods, he met up with Professor Ventag every evening once the talks for the day ended. Ves shared his current thoughts and difficulties and Ventag offered various hints or solutions, some of which were so difficult or advanced that only a Senior could realize these design aspects!

All of these improvements and additions elevated the design in his mind to a higher standard. To be honest, the technical planning involved already went beyond the reach of an Apprentice.

"It's not completely my design anymore."

Ves half-understood some of the measures, but many of them simply went beyond him, particularly the design elements revolving around redundancy and compartmentalization. The drafts that Professor Ventag casually sketched in a projection sometimes made the younger mech designer's eyes turn dizzy.

He learned not to peer in too close in these details. As a mech designer, he didn't necessarily need to know the ins-and-out of individual components and sections of his design. From a pure design ideology, they merely needed to fit the pieces of the puzzle together in the most optimal and synergistic combination.

"Even if it's not completely my design anymore, as long as I maintain overall control of the direction of the design, it's still my work."

The assistance provided by Professor Ventag was only supplementary to his design process. Ves essentially turned him into a very smart database who would spit out the right answers or at least point him in the right direction whenever he asked a difficult question.

For his part, the professor was content to let Ves take the reins and demonstrate his design process in real time.

This was also a test, after all.

When Ves next met up with Venerable Foster at a courtyard, his lack of focus on her attracted the expert pilot's attention.

His persistent smile as he goofed off in his mind trying to refine his mech concept stood in stark contrast to the frowning, glowering or sneering faces of the other members of the two delegations.

Ves cared nothing at all about their difficulties! At this moment, the momentum of designing a new, innovative and original mech in a weight class which very few mech designers dabbled in before swept him up entirely!

Even if the heavens may fall, let his mech be designed!

"What are you smiling about so much?" Venerable Foster asked in an abrasive tone. "Don't you realize we've got you Brighters by the balls?"

"Huh what?" Ves drew his attention from his ongoing mental design work. "Oh that? Pff. Who cares. The only way this pissing match will end is if both sides compromise and meet in the middle. All of the blustering that's going on now is merely theater."

The Venerable took affront of his dismissive attitude. "Say again? We're deadly serious here. You Brighters ought to be grateful if we canceled our invasion of Bentheim in exchange for concessions!"

"Yeah right. Everyone and their mother knows the Mech Legion is overreaching in order to get into a position to invade Bentheim. You guys won't actually go through with it because the military forces that you'll commit in the invasion will be devastated. Either they'll break against our system and planetary fortifications, or the Mech Corps will somehow cut off your escape route and crush your stranded carriers and mechs."

What Ves just said was the most logical outcome of the invasion. Barring any nasty surprises and brilliant stratagems, a reckless invasion of the Bentheim System would never end well.

"Even if our forces fall up short, Bentheim will still be ruined. Just the threat of war will spook many traders and investors from doing business in your precious port system." Venerable Foster smirked.

"Who will be willing to throw away their mechs and ships into the pit, then?" Ves poked back. "Your Mech Legion is led by selfish nobles wearing officer hats. I doubt that anyone of them would voluntarily play along to what is essentially a suicide mission for them. Will they truly be willing to throw away their military assets and their own lives for the greater good of the Vesia Kingdom?"

"A true loyal Vesian will know what is best!" She replied in a righteous manner, unaware that she fell into his verbal trap.

Ves smirked at that. He might not completely understand the Vesian mindset, but human nature didn't change. The agency problem that he learned about in his business classes also applied to the government and the military.

"I don't think the individual nobles and their noble houses will be enthusiastic about throwing away the lives of their scions and discarding their military assets. How would you compensate their losses? The Vesians don't have that much wealth to throw around and it's already been divvied up by all the duchies. Those nobles who offered up their forces would all be pissed at the puppet masters who orchestrated this show and perhaps even intensify the rebellions within your state! At the very least, an attack on Bentheim will hurt you Vesians just as much!"

The self-serving nature of the Vesians prevented them from engaging in large, coordinated actions. A possible invasion of Bentheim would be nothing different. Nobody wanted to stick out their heads and volunteer for the most dangerous duties only to benefit their more cowardly rivals.

From the intensifying glower on Venerable Foster's face, she recognized the truth in his words. That didn't lessen her determination at all. No matter what, she supported anything that made the Bright Republic suffer.

"One way or another, we'll make you bleed." She hissed.

Ves waved his hand dismissively and already went back to tinkering on his design in his head. "Whatever. You Vesians always talk big, but you never deliver on them once you balk at the price you have to pay."

Obviously, Ves made little progress in befriending Venerable Foster. They simply weren't compatible people.

At least Lord Javier put down his arrogance and made an effort to grow closer to Ves, though his lack of leverage also had a lot to do with it.

In contrast, Venerable Foster was an expert pilot in her prime. Though she likely lost the extremely expensive Belisarius in her mission, being pivotal in the effort to deliver a dose of high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum to Prince Colchester more than made up for the losses.



In the perspective of those old dinosaurs, an extra hundred years of their life was worth incalculably more than a mech worth as much as a mech regiment if not more!

From the way the other Vesians regarded Venerable Foster, she enjoyed a considerable position of favor among their ranks. Calling her Prince Colchester's pet wouldn't be too far from the truth.

That even expert pilots needed to bow their heads to someone made an impression on Ves. Only a tiny amount of people truly called the shots in their respective states and organizations. Others were forced to take orders from someone else no matter their strengths and achievements.

"Unless you're a Master Mech Designer, an ace pilot, a high official or similar, you will never be able to make your own decisions. Not completely."

Even so, part of the reason why Venerable Foster enjoyed so much attention and respect was because she enjoyed great growth prospects. This ridiculously talented mech pilot not only possessed an exceedingly high genetic aptitude, she was also loyal and hard-working.

As long as she kept up her current growth rate, she might very well become a pillar of the Hafner Duchy and the Vesia Kingdom!

Ves still found her presence at the peace talks to be wholly out of place. He understood why Prince Colchester needed her support in gaining traction for a possible peace treaty, but she did not even try to play along with the rules of the game.

"Why is she here, really?"

He drew his head from the clouds long enough to realize that the worsening moods between the delegates was detrimental to the goal of the peace talks. Why couldn't both sides recognize that all of this posturing was useless?

Ves felt something in the air. This standoff was building up to something. To what exactly, he couldn't figure out. He wasn't conceited enough to try and predict what Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester had in store for the stalled negotiations.

"Those two are absolutely not simple. They won't let this deadlock continue."

At some point, he received an invitation to attend an informal dinner with Colonel Xelven and a couple of military attachés.

Ves frowned at the message on his comm. "What does the colonel want with me?"

He attended the dinner that night at one of the largely-empty restaurants of Kester Hills. The original chefs did a great job turning freshly-imported ingredients into wonderful dishes.

During the occasion, Colonel Xelven grilled Ves on his impression of Venerable Foster.

"Do you believe she is a supporter of Prince Colchester?"

That was a difficult question for Ves to answer. "I think she's in his camp, but she doesn't care too much about politics. I think she's only aligned with Prince Colchester due to special circumstances. She's pro-war, but she cares too much about the Kingdom to let that get in the way of recognizing Prince Colchester's attempt to save them from a greater calamity."

The colonel swirled his glass of wine as he contemplated Ves' response. "I'm told she is rather direct as well, is that correct?"

"She's no diplomat. That's for certain. It's not an act either." Ves stated confidently. "However, she's also intractable for that reason."

Colonel Xelven looked disappointed. "You must work harder to break the ice with her. I'm sure you are aware of our current difficulties. We need every

avenue at our disposal if we wish to break the ongoing deadlock in the negotiations."

If Xelven went as far as pushing Ves to achieve some sort of breakthrough in his attempts to get Venerable Foster to act cordially to him, then the situation was truly dire for the Tovar Peace Delegation!

"Are we about to give in, sir?"

"I can't comment on that, least of all here, Mr. Larkinson." The colonel said mildly. "Besides this, I also want to give you a warning. Don't wander off in or around Kester Hills. Something untoward might happen if you don't pay attention to your own safety."

Ves narrowed his eyes. What did that mean? The Honored Ones made sure that no one would attack the peace delegations. Who could possibly be so stupid to launch an attack on individual members?

He nodded regardless. "I'll be a bit more prudent in where I go. I haven't been wandering off very much in the first place."

"With hope, we will come to a satisfactory accord with the Vesians. We are not fooled by their inflated ambitions."

Everyone else agreed with that standpoint, though Ves wasn't sure if anyone truly believed it. The Vesian sabre-rattling spooked many Brighters, particularly the businessmen with lots of assets in Bentheim.

Will the Tovar Peace Delegation still be able to maintain a united front against the Vesian threats?

#### **Chapter 1046 Unglamorous Role**

When Ves next met up with Venerable Foster at their usual courtyard, an attendant poured some tea for the both of them before drawing back to the sides.

"Why are you still agreeing to meet with me?" Ves asked. His patience was wearing thin after several more fruitless days of trying to get Venerable Foster to open up. "You obviously don't enjoy my presence."

The expert pilot huffed and raised her chin at him. "It has never been about befriending you. I am performing my duty here."

"And what exactly is your duty? Because it doesn't seem like you are trying to act cordially to me at all. Do you even care about the peace talks?"

"You're dangerous, Mr. Larkinson." Venerable Foster's burning eyes bore into his own. Her force of will pressed on his mind like a tsunami washing against a seawall. "Ever since I first met you at the ship, I knew there was something more about you. The events that took place there and your seemingly effortless escape makes me wonder if your current persona is a facade."

Ves smiled ruefully at her. "I'm a mech designer."

"You say that like it's a talisman that absolves you of all suspicion. No. You're more than that. I can feel it. There is a certain vibe about you that raises my hackles. Until I can expose you for who you really are, you'll remain within my sight. I won't allow you to wander off in order to manipulate my fellow Vesians with your duplicitous arguments."

What was her problem? Ves sighed in an exasperated manner and crossed his arms. Even if he partially agreed with her assessment, he was not some devious mastermind who meant any ill during the peace talks. He knew better than to pull off some shenanigans in such a sensitive time and place.

"No matter what you think of me, we are both part of our respective peace delegations. We're here in an attempt to make peace. Why can't you set aside our differences and focus on what we share in common instead?"

"Anyone who befriends a devious two-faced man like you will regret it." Venerable Foster declared with no uncertainty.

How could Ves ever worm his way into her shell when she was as prickly as a hedgehog? Her ostensible aim of keeping an eye on him lest he charmed her fellow Vesians sounded ridiculous.

Surprisingly, Foster asked a question of her own. One which did not include some sort of insult or accusation.

"I heard you are working on a design. I've noticed that you've been distracted lately as well. What are you working on that commands so much of your attention?"

Where she heard that, Ves didn't know, but it signified that the Vesians hadn't stopped in their endeavors to gather intelligence. Nonetheless, he was glad to take advantage of the opening Foster afforded him. Talking about mechs was a lot better than trading snide remarks!

Even so, Ves felt reluctant to reveal the details of his upcoming design. It was so sensitive and controversial that leaking it prematurely might lead to all kinds of negative outcomes. The Vesians would certainly make use of the information and turn it against him in order to sabotage his rise.

"I'm working on a space knight design." He said, sparing little details other than the mech type in question. "It's going to have a number of quirks, but it will essentially be a simple space knight at its core."

"A space knight, huh?" She wondered. "I have practiced with space knights, though I have never felt the inclination to dedicate myself in their use. There are other mech pilots who are able to perform much better than I ever will."

"Why not? Aren't you good at anything with your amazing talent and genetic aptitude? Or is it more about adopting the correct mindset?"

The latter made Venerable Foster surprised. "For a mech designer, you sure know what you are talking about. You are correct. Skill doesn't have anything to do with it. Piloting a knight mech, whether on land or in space, is easy to

learn. It is not a coincidence that mech cadets begin their training by learning how to pilot a knight mech. Their slow, deliberate movements and their tolerance for damage and rough treatment makes them ideal platforms to get mech pilots acclimated to humanoid mechs."

"Yet not a lot of people end up specializing in piloting knight mechs."

Foster shook her head. "It is not a mech type which satisfies those who wish to fight proactively. A knight mech's main role is to act as a wall for their allies. However, the few people who stick with knight mechs and adopt the proper mindset of a protector can pull off amazing feats with their sturdy mechs. They are an admirable if melodramatic class of mech pilots."

Having experienced the perspective of a knight mech pilot first-hand, Ves understood her meaning. "Those chivalrous mech pilots can be a handful, but their hearts are in the right place. I would have thought that their mindset would be a good fit for your own."

"Perhaps in an earlier age, that would have made some sense. However, in the Age of Mechs, knight mech pilots are relegated to grunts. Mech pilots do not need to be particularly skilled to make good use of a knight mech, whether on land or in space. It is enough to know how to move and how to orient a shield at certain angles. There is a reason why expert pilots who specialize in piloting knight mechs are the rarest of us all."

There was a tone of admiration in her voice that Ves did not expect to hear. She exhibited genuine respect and admiration towards those who dedicated their lives to protecting their comrades.

Having worked out a super-medium mech concept for his vision for his upcoming design, Ves knew that his work would be beyond the realm of an average mech pilot.

While he predicted that all-rounders would still be able to pilot his Qilanxo-inspired mech with some effectiveness, they needed to endure a lot more burdens compared to piloting a more basic space knight.

In light of these complications, Ves reoriented his target audience away from casual mech pilots. Mech pilots specialized in piloting space knights would be able to appreciate the extra options Ves intended to add in his design.

Their mastery in the basics of operating a space knight insured that they wouldn't be unduly mentally encumbered when they worked with extra features. Making use of the limitless options the polarizing module provided to the mech had the potential to substantially increase the defensive prowess of the mech, but only if the mech pilot made the correct decisions!

If they recklessly activated an omni-directional polarizing field to defend against a volley of laser beams coming from a single direction, they'd be wasting the majority of the mech's limited energy reserves. A skilled space knight pilot would know how narrow they needed to configure the polarizing field to offer the most adequate level of defense while wasting as little energy as possible.

The more efficient the mech pilot made use of the polarizing module, the longer its protective effects lasted, thereby increasing its impact on the battlefield!

Thus, recognizing that his vision for his design would result in an advanced machine with a high skill floor and an astronomically high skill ceiling, Ves gave up on the large audience of all-rounder mech pilots.

Ves spoke again after a short pause. "Do you think knight mech pilots get a bad rap?"

"They are underappreciated." She responded. "It is like a group of children wanting to play hide and seek. Every child wants to hide but none of them

wants to take the role of seeking them out. However, a game of hide and seek won't begin until they decide who gets to be the unlucky seeker."

"So the same dynamic goes on in most outfits?"

"Correct. Those who volunteer to pilot knight mechs are usually the least-skilled or least-regarded among them. I think it is a rather deplorable way to decide what is perhaps the most pivotal role in a unit."

"It's not necessarily a good idea to put the worst mech pilot in charge of the vital job shielding friendly mechs." Ves caught her logic. "However, regardless of what you think, it will happen anyway. Piloting a knight mech simply isn't popular enough."

Certainly, this wasn't universally the case. For example, Ves made sure that his Blackbeak mechs were a pleasure to pilot. While they did not perform their defensive roles as well as a defensive knight mech, the Blackbeak's high mobility and endurance opened up many options to enterprising mech pilots.

It helped that he positioned the Blackbeak as a premium mech model. More expensive mechs were always better regarded than more disposable mechs. This would also aid his next design to a certain extent.

"There's a lot of bad knight mech models for sale." Venerable Foster remarked. "Although I don't pay too much attention to the market, I've heard lots of complaints about the space knights that mech designers cook up in their labs."

"What's wrong with the models?"

"Their designers are too narrow-minded. Just because a space knight is meant to serve as a defensive bulwark doesn't mean they should be constrained to that role."



"You may have a point when it comes to offensive space knights, but defensive space knights are too slow to pull off advanced maneuvers."

"Who says you need to employ advanced maneuvers to pose a threat to an enemy?" Venerable Foster prodded back. "They don't need to be particularly fast or agile either. However, what they do need is power. Enough power to dent the hull of a starship. You can't believe how many mech designers neglect that space knights need a good amount of mechanical strength."

Ves admittedly hadn't thought too deeply about this issue. In fact, more than once, he contemplated reducing the space the artificial musculature took up in order to make more room for other features. After all, a slow and fat space knight wouldn't be entering into melee range very often, right?

"How important is it for a space knight to retain its strength in melee combat?"

"Very important." Foster replied. "Having the option to be a threat in close range serves to reassure mech pilots that they aren't impotent. Good space knight pilots and good mech commanders will find a way to position space knights in a position where they can leverage their strengths and defensive capabilities."

Her remarks gave Ves a lot of food for thought. While he had his Mastery of landbound knight mechs to lean upon to help him understand the mindset of his target audience, space knight pilots faced different concerns.

Ves needed to identify these differences and make the appropriate adjustments. Otherwise, he might make some missteps due to his mistaken assumptions!

"Thank you for illuminating me about space knights, Venerable Foster."

"I don't need your thanks." She acerbically replied. "It's not my intention to help you out. I just don't want you to mistreat mech pilots."

"What's it to you? Most of my customers will probably be mech pilots from the Bright Republic."

"I don't fear your mech designs." Venerable Foster grinned with a bloodthirsty glint in her eyes. "In fact, I want to see you succeed. I want you to sell your mechs as much as possible so that whenever I encounter them in battle, I'll do everything in my power to crush them completely and utterly."

"That is... quite some reason."

It figured that Venerable Foster only wanted to build him up so that she could personally tear down his works. She took an almost perverse pleasure at the thought of ruining his products in person.

Venerable Foster released a devious laugh before she abruptly wavered on her seat. "This.. something strange is happening.."

"What?"

"My body.. is not under control.."

A creeping sense of foreboding entered the courtyard. Ves hadn't quite adjusted to the sudden change.

"What is wrong with you?"

To the sides, the attendants present in the courtyard all collapsed and lost consciousness at the same time!

"Poison!" Foster declared and then turned her gaze at Ves. "You! How come you aren't affected! Is this your plot! Are you the culprit?!"

Ves quickly held up his hands. "Hey! I don't have anything to do with it! My body is resistant against poison, that's all! Just look at my face. Do I look like someone who would stab everyone in the back and ruin the peace talks?"

The expert pilot looked skeptical, but eventually made up her mind. "Kill me now if you are responsible. If not, go sound the alarm."

When Ves raised his comm and tried to send out an emergency call, the device failed to light up. It had been sabotaged!

"My comm is not working!"

This attack was more serious than everyone thought!

#### **Chapter 1047 Silent Kester Hills**

When Colonel Xelven warned him of the possibility of foul play, Ves put up his guard since then. Even so, he didn't believe that anyone would be able to pull off an attack with all of the security measures in place.

Surely the Honored Ones had everything in hand, right? Hundreds of exoskeleton soldiers patrolled the streets and facilities of Kester Hills.

Further out of sight, several mech companies from the Mech Corps, Mech Legion and the Honored Ones jointly patrolled the entire region and made sure no one would be able to sneak up to the retreat.

However, all of those precautions seemed moot as every single device shut down at once! More egregious than that, every single person in sight collapsed at the same time by some poison that all of the detectors failed to pick up in the air or in their water and food.

This was preposterously difficult to achieve! Ves knew that everyone had put their utmost effort into making this a secure venue, and for all of their precautions to fail so catastrophically indicated that the plot ran deep!

While Venerable Foster attempted to maintain consciousness, Ves walked over to the collapsed bodies of the attendants. The Reinaldan servants still breathed, but no matter how much Ves patted them, they didn't regain consciousness.

"They're not dead. Just out cold."

"Lethal poisons are much harder to slip by the detectors. They also draw too much attention." Foster uttered as she shakily climbed up to her feet. "I think.. my gene optimization treatments are helping me resist the effect. I'm surprised you are better off than me. Come here so I can lean on you. I can't move by myself at the moment."

As Ves approached the expert pilot, he was wary about coming too close.

"Are you really convinced I am not involved?"

"I think if you are the actual culprit, you would have done something to me by now."

"Killing an expert pilot is no joke. You know the MTA will get involved if something untoward happens to you. I think that's one of the main reasons why the culprits merely tried to put us to sleep."

"I wouldn't put too much stock in their restraint. This action violates many agreements. Whoever is responsible is likely hiding their true identities."

Right now, they didn't know why everyone collapsed and why their electronics stopped working. Without functional comms, neither Ves or Venerable Foster would be able to call upon for help!

Ves and Foster recognized that this criss threatened both the Tovar Peace Delegation and the Colchester Peace Delegation. Right now, they finally managed to put their differences aside. It was more important to work together than to hold on to old hatreds.

When Ves supported Venerable Foster's body as she leaned on him, he tried not to become affected by her close proximity. The expert pilot in turn took notice of his ease of movement despite the additional burden. His muscles pressed against her body, allowing her to feel his underlying strength and body heat.

"For a mech designer, you are remarkably fit." She remarked.

"It's a souvenir from a previous adventure in the frontier."

"What a waste."

"I don't think so. It has helped me become immune to many poisons and diseases."

Whatever substance affected everyone must be very potent, because it even managed to affect Foster's physique despite going through several rounds of CFA gene optimization treatments.

As they stepped out of the courtyard and into the main streets of Kester Hills, they encountered an unnaturally silent village. The Honored Ones who ordinarily patrolled from place to place in their fully-enclosed exoskeleton armor all stood rigid in the open.

Ves and Foster approached a patrol of four frozen exoskeleton soldiers.

Ves knocked at the chest plate of one of them and furrowed his brows. "Their armor has been shut down. I bet the soldiers inside the shells are unconscious as well."

This was very serious. If even guards had been neutralized, who protected them all from attack?

"It figures." Venerable Foster sneered even as she continued to lean against Ves. "The Honored Ones are lazy and incompetent. We shouldn't have trusted them so much to provide security."

Ves did not entirely agree with her assessment. "Not all Reinaldians are the same. The Honored Ones assigned to guard us consists of their elites. They're a lot more diligent than you give them credit for. Our opponents are just a bit more sophisticated in comparison."

The eerie silence and the frozen suits got to him in a way. He nervously flexed his free hand, contemplating whether he should materialize the Amastendira. His other hand kept supporting Foster's body. Her body was hard, lean and muscular. Her proximity continued to distract him from his surroundings.

"Keep your head in focus!" Foster barked, having worked away some of the substances in her body. "This isn't the time for you to be absent-minded!"

"Where do you suggest we go? I think we should check up on Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester's temporary estates. We have a duty to see to the safety of our respective patrons."

"I think.. They'll be fine. Their individual security is very robust." Venerable Foster shook her head. She obviously hadn't heard about the near-disastrous pirate raid against the Tovar Peace Delegation. "We need to go to the center of this village and find some way of taking charge of the defenses. We're useless without weapons, armor and mechs."

Ves looked around the village and strained his ears for any sounds of fighting. He saw and heard nothing.

"Nothing seems to be happening."

"That doesn't mean anything. Perhaps the culprits are kidnapping some of our delegates. We need to arm ourselves before we can contemplate anything else. Checking up on our fellow delegates can wait."

He tentatively agreed with her course of action. Right now, it would take too long to check up on Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester, especially considering they occupied estates on the opposite ends of Kester Hills.

The conference chamber where the negotiations took place behind closed doors was situated very closely to the security center where the Honored Ones coordinated all of their patrols. It would be easy for Ves to check up on

Colonel Xelven and all of the other main negotiators once he was finished with the security center.

As they walked the short distance to the center of the village, they encountered more and more frozen exoskeleton armors. Brighter and Vesian delegates also popped up from time to time. They all fell unconscious without exception.

When Ves studied their bodies, he noted that some of them were hybrids just like him. Underneath their human appearances, these members of high society hid scales, unusual coloration and other alien organs beneath their prim and proper clothes.

Even so, their added alien enhancements failed to protect them from the substance that put them all out cold!

As Venerable Foster leaned right next to Ves, she saw exactly what he looked out for. Frankly, she looked rather shocked at the frequency of alien traits.

"How come there are so many people who chose to go hybrid?"

Was she for real? Ves gazed at her face in close proximity and could see genuine puzzlement in her eyes. He lowered his irritation.

"I always suspected that a lot of powerful people are hybrids." He admitted.

"It's kind of an open secret in high society. The advantages afforded by certain alien traits can give them an advantage over baseline humans."

"Yet at least half of them are hybrids! That is way more than I thought!"

Even Ves was momentarily surprised by the frequency of alien hybridization. The folly and pitfalls of reckless genetic modification were very well known. Even so, it appeared that many humans simply couldn't resist the temptation of blending their human genes with alien genes, thereby gaining a powerful boost in their Attributes as well as gain some unique alien traits.

Those with enough money could draw upon much higher quality gene mod templates which focused on enhancing their lifespan or increasing their mental attributes. Those were also the most delicate and prone to side effects, but those side effects could be mitigated to an extent as long as enough money was involved.

Ves shouldn't complain. He had inadvertently joined the club of hybrids and benefited from it, so he could not fault other humans from pursuing something similar.

It took some time for them to reach the center of the village. As they shuffled over to the entrance of the security center, they found the front gates to be locked. They tried to go around but found no other way to enter the facility.

Strangely enough, throughout their wandering so far, they encountered no hostiles at all. The eerie silence and lack of activity began to weigh heavier and heavier on their minds. What was going on?

"We won't be able to get into the security center unless we break in."

Venerable Foster concluded. "Even if we manage to break in, all the gear and equipment are likely sabotaged as well. There's no point trying to get inside."

"Alright. Should we check up on the conference chamber?"

"We might as well. Aside from Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester, the lead negotiators are all important people. They are also at risk."

Ves continued to support Venerable Foster's weak body as they crossed over the street and entered the reception hall of the conference chamber. The gates that led into the main chamber was sealed shut. It would take considerable force to open them up manually.

Foster studied the obstacle preventing them from checking if anything happened inside. "These gates are too heavy for us to force open by our own strength. We need to force it open somehow."



Ves was pretty sure he could burn a hole through the solid gates with the Amastendira, but the last thing he wanted to do was brandish this weapon in front of a Vesian like Venerable Foster!

He looked around for another solution. He eventually settled upon the frozen ranks of exoskeleton soldiers. Their shuts had been shut down and the weapons in their grasp were inactive as well.

Yet that did not mean they turned into useless ornaments.

"These gates look formidable, but they're mainly big slabs of alloy. I think I can force an opening if I rig up an explosive device from the energy cells and batteries of those exoskeleton soldiers. Whatever sabotage deactivated their gear may have turned them inactive, but I doubt it touched their energy reserves."

"Do it. We need to get inside."

Ves put Venerable Foster's body down on the floor and approached one of the frozen armors. He had seen many models of exoskeleton armor, and understood their general layout and principles.

It wasn't easy to open up the section of their armor that granted access to the small energy cells that powered everything. However, by borrowing some nearby objects, he pressed and shimmied his way into opening the respective compartment after a few minutes of fiddling around.

He retrieved four energy cells designed specifically to power exoskeleton armor and put them aside.

"Is that enough?" Foster asked.

"If I can induce these energy cells to discharge their energy at once, the damage will be severe. I don't think it's enough to burn through those thick gates. I need at least a dozen energy cells."

Once he fidgeted with the other exoskeleton armors and retrieved the necessary amount, he began to link them up with metal wires he ripped off some kind of strange artwork in the hall.

When he placed his jury rigged explosive against the gates and activated the individual cells, he quickly ran away as they grew hot!

Ves picked up Venerable Foster in an unceremonious grasp and quickly ran outside! "Hang on, the explosion is going to be violent!"

BOOM!

A hot and fiery explosion scorched from behind, flashing Ves and Venerable Foster with a wave of heat!

As the dust of the explosion settled, the lingering heat still made it uncomfortable for Ves and Foster to get close. They waited for a couple of minutes for the immediate surroundings to cool off.

Venerable Foster looked impressed at the damage. "At least it worked."

"Sh." Ves said. "Do you hear that? Something is active inside."

Ves heard some murky sounds through the other side of the hole. It seemed that even as the rest of Kester Hills went silent, something was definitely going on inside the conference chamber!

#### **Chapter 1048 Convenient Shield**

When Ves rigged the energy cells he pried off the paralyzed exoskeleton armors to explode, he underestimated their explosive yield.

How could he know that the elite guards of the Honored Ones made use of high-capacity infantry-grade energy cells? Although not as exaggeratingly stuffed with energy as ultracompact batteries, these high-capacity energy cells stored at least fifty percent more energy in the same volume compared to a regular one?

Of course, their price was a lot more expensive as well. Normally, an infantry troop would ordinarily carry spares or resupply themselves when they ran out rather than use these high-capacity energy cells.

The enormous blast that broke the gates into the formal conference chamber did more than breach an opening. It also cracked the floor, flung debris everywhere, heated the surroundings to a dangerous degree and unleashed a concussive blast that would have walloped anyone standing in the reception hall or the conference chamber!

The lingering heat and toxins from the site of the blast made it rather dangerous to cross through the smoke obscuring the conference chamber. Ves needed to at least wait for some time before the safer parts of the ground looked cool enough to walk over. Just to be safe, Ves momentarily diverted to place a low bench over the affected ground to walk over.

"Do you hear that? What is that sound?" Venerable Foster puzzlingly asked. The weakness in her body still didn't allow her to walk by herself, forcing her to either sit on the ground or lean against Ves. She did not enjoy her moment of weakness. "If only the poison hasn't affected me so much!"

"You should be lucky you can stay awake and talk." Ves retorted as he peered his ears into the other side.

The obscuring toxic smoke blocked most of his vision and dampened most of the sounds from the conference chamber.

Ves didn't know whether he should wait outside for the smoke to fade or storm in and confront whatever went on inside.

"We should go in." Venerable Foster whispered as he leaned her against his body again. "If there are only friendlies inside, we should see if your improvised explosive injured them. If there are hostiles inside, this might be the time to take them out quickly."

"We don't have any weapons."

"The detonation was your weapon. Are you so weak that you can't finish off a human with your hands?"

Ves shrugged. Secretly, he held out his free hand behind his back and discreetly summoned the Amastendira. Whatever stuff was going on inside, he wouldn't go inside unarmed.

With his decision made, they climbed up the low bench and walked over it, sparing their expensive shoes and their feet from getting scorched from the cracked and irregular surface of heated stone and glowing gunk.

As they entered the massive vault-like chamber, the huge window from above illuminated the massive ring-shaped table in the center.

Right now, most of the delegates sitting at two distinct sides of the table were unconscious. Just like the people outside the chamber, they too had been affected by the poison slipped into their bodies.

Yet different from everywhere else, two people managed to retain their consciousness. Not only that, they spent their time awake fruitfully.

"Major Deborah Sanawn!" Ves uttered in shock.

"Lord Brennan of House Novien!" Foster exclaimed as well.

Major Deborah Sanawn served alongside Lieutenant Colonel Xelven as his second-in-command during this assignment. While Ves hadn't interacted with her much, he knew that Xelven considered her to be his protege within the Bureau of Sector Affairs.

As for Lord Brennan of House Novien, he was a cousin of Count Reginald of the same house. Count Reginald also served in the Mech Legion and acted as Colonel Xelven's counterpart during the negotiations. The count held

Prince Colchester's direct trust, so in turn Lord Brennan should have been loyal to the prince in turn.

Yet what Ves and Venerable Foster encountered put the loyalties of the other pair into question. That was because they were sprawled close to the bodies of Colonel Xelven and Count Reginald!

Headless bodies!

"What have you done!?" Ves asked with horror.

The huge blast took Major Sanawn and Lord Brennan by surprise. Whatever they had been up to, they'd been rudely interrupted by the concussive wave that swept over their bodies and flung them a distance away from the two headless corpses.

"Look over there!" Foster weakly pointed with her chin. "They cut off the heads of our lead negotiators to smuggle them away!"

Flung into a different direction, a pair of transparent cages held two macabre heads locked in artificial sleep.

They were the heads of Colonel Xelven and Count Reginald!

The only reason why they looked asleep and not dead was the machinery hooked up in the neck portion. As long as oxygen and blood circulated through their heads, their brains and the valuable information contained within would still be retrievable!

The plot immediately became apparent to Ves. The true threat did not solely come from the outside. Regardless of how much Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester vetted the members of their delegation, they completely missed the treachery brewing within their third-in-commands!

"Don't move, Ves!" Major Sanawn yelled as she popped off the hand from her wrist to reveal an organic ballistic gun barrel within the exposed flesh! "I've

read the reports! I know you are always armed! If you move that arm from your back, I'll shoot!"

Ves inwardly cursed to himself. He finally paid the price of showing off the Amastendira. How many people had access to those reports?!

The concussive blast that bowled over the traitors affected their coordination. The organic weapon implanted within Sanawn's forearm wavered in its aim, though not to the extent of missing the mark.

Lord Brennan apparently stood closer to the site of the blast because it took more time for him to regain his wits. Even so, soon he would be drawing out his own holdout weapon, doubling the danger Ves needed to face!

One way or another, he needed to resolve this matter quickly!

Yet as he rapidly went through his options, he wondered why Major Sanawn hadn't shot him yet. Why was she holding him at gunpoint? Even if her aim was rather shaky, her organic weapon surely possessed more shots, right?

Realization struck him as Venerable Foster breathed loud enough to tickle his ears. He immediately adjusted his grip on Foster so that she pressed to the front of his body. His forceful movement elicited an angry squawk from the weakened expert pilot.

"What are you doing, you brute?!"

Yet despite the movements, Major Sanawn didn't shoot.

"You're afraid, aren't you?" Ves grinned as he felt he regained some control during this crisis. "As long as you kill Venerable Foster, you know the MTA will investigate the matter. Not only will your life be forfeit, but your entire ploy will be exposed as well. I doubt your masters will want to draw the MTA's attention!"

The extent to which the MTA enforced their own laws always struck fear in the hearts of humans. Although Ves witnessed plenty of times that their intervention had waned to an extent, as demonstrated by the Skull Architect's continued survival in exile to the frontier, just the threat of MTA intervention was enough to stop Major Sanawn!

However, what Ves didn't count on was that Venerable Foster did not take kindly to being used as a human shield. She immediately squirmed in his grasp and weakly bashed her elbows against her captor.

"Unhand me, you foul Brighter! I am not a shield for you to block incoming fire!"

Ves tightened his grip over the angry expert pilot and tried to keep her in his grasp. Her lack of strength and leverage prevented her from harming him, though her thrashing grew increasingly violent, making it difficult for him to position her body to cover his own against Major Sanawn's organic weapon.

If there was one benefit to Venerable Foster's thrashing, Major Sanawn seemed slightly distracted by the spectacle. Even as Ves tried to wrangle the expert pilot's body in his tight grip, he hadn't missed her momentary lack of focus.

Chance!

Ves immediately whipped out his Amastendira from behind his back and fired a bright laser beam at medium power at Colonel Xelven's protege!

A bright flash of golden light engulfed the room as the laser barely missed Major Sanawn's form. Ves expected that his aim might be off, but the current configuration of the Amastendira burned for two seconds, enough for him to correct his aim. He flicked the muzzle of his laser pistol to the left, cutting through Major Sanawn's service dress uniform and the vulnerable body underneath!

The traitor instantly collapsed, half of her torso cut and burned.

Unlike Ves, Major Sanawn did not possess any convenient expert pilot to make him hesitate in firing!

"Shoot Lord Brennan as well!" Foster shouted, having calmed down in her grasp. She finally set her priorities straight. Though she still questioned where Ves whipped out such a big and powerful laser pistol, this was no time to ask questions. "He's going for a weapon as well I think!"

Ves calmly shot the Vesian third-in-command without any suspense. The man still hadn't recovered from the aftereffects of the explosion.

Only two people remained conscious in the conference chamber. A pair of laser-burned corpses joined the two headless corpses on the ground.

As blood, smoke and the smell of burnt flesh suffused the air, Ves still wondered what was going on here. The treachery of some of the most trusted people in Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester's delegation still stunned him to an extent.

"Do you hear that sound?" Foster called, turning his attention back to the increasingly growing noise suffusing the entire chamber. "It's accompanied by a vibration. It's coming from the ground. Something is tunneling below us!"

The hard tiles in the middle of the conference chamber already started to bulge from the tunneling machine about to breach the floor.

"This must be their escape route!"

"Ves! Take the two heads and bring us out! We have to go before the tunneling machine bores into the chamber!"

"There's not enough time." Ves quickly judged. "Besides, I can't bring you and two of those head boxes at the same time. I have a better idea."



Ves kept her within her grasp but also whispered a set of verbal commands to the Amastendira. He tweaked its power setting to maximum and turned its firing mode into a cutting beam.

He hoped that he made the direct decision.

Within seconds, the tiles in the center of the ring-shaped table bulged and broke. A narrow tunneling machine as wide as an aircar emerged from the opening.

It was one of the smallest tunneling machines Ves had ever encountered! Already, he could vaguely spot that its exterior consisted of sensor-dampening materials. Clearly, the narrow tunneling machine served a similar role as Calabast's stealth crawler.

The tunneling machine was meant to sneak into high security areas from below in order to extract a small number of agents or operatives in the field!

If there was one major weakness common to every vehicle focused on stealth or minimizing their sensor signature, it was that their exterior armor plating didn't hold up well against direct damage!

Even before the hatch of the tunneling machine opened up, Ves fired his Amastendira at full power! The cutting beam took only moments to sear through the armor of the machine damage whatever was inside!

Faint screams echoed from the opening as Venerable Foster witnessed the Amastendira's power at first hand through her squinting eyes!

"I knew there was more to you than a mech designer!" She yelled accusingly at Ves. "Who do you work for, really? Flashlight? Searchlight?"

She squirmed anew, and somehow managed to stumble out of his grip. As soon as Venerable Foster opened her mouth yet again, the half-crippled tunneling machine suddenly self-destructed!

Both of their bodies were flung away from the concussive shockwave released by the explosion!

### Chapter 1049 Holding the Cards

The conference chamber fell into ruins. Rubble and debris from the self-destructed tunneling machine bombarded most of the space with dangerous fragments. The shockwave sweeping over the entire chamber flung the unconscious delegates and their seats backwards and against the walls!

Ves cracked open his eyes roughly a minute after the explosion. His resilient physique allowed him to recover faster than anyone else, not that most would be waking up anytime soon.

He threw his gaze at Venerable Foster's body. She suffered some cuts as some sharp pieces of metal debris brushed past her bodies. Other than that, she wasn't in danger of losing her life, so Ves quickly cast aside his worry.

Slowly but surely, he climbed back up to his feet. He spotted the Amastendira ripped from his grasp and thrown to the ground a few steps away from him. Ves concentrated on the weapon and caused it to dematerialize back into his Inventory.

"That's a handy trick."

He turned his gaze towards the middle of the conference chamber and spotted nothing but a broken and debris-strewn hole in the ground. Only fragments remained of what used to be a stealth-oriented tunneling machine.

Ves guessed that it would be impossible to gather any clues from the remnants. He shook his head at the awful sight but walked closer and peered into the hole.

"No sounds. No vibrations. I doubt another machine will come."

That gave him some relief. He had a feeling the conspirators did not employ any other assets for fear of discovery.

After tentatively concluding that a second tunneling machine wouldn't come up, he turned around and sought out the head boxes containing the cut-off heads of Colonel Xelven and Count Reginald.

The tunneling machine's self-destruction bounced the transparent boxes against the wall, causing them to land on skewed orientations.

Fortunately, it appeared the head boxes had been designed to be robust, as the machinery keeping the heads stuffed inside some sort of preservative liquid still worked normally as far as he could see.

The sight of them still creeped him out. Ves couldn't help but right their orientation.

"What is going on here?" He wondered.

Whoever masterminded this attack apparently didn't plan on killing everyone. Instead, they just wanted to put everyone asleep and render all equipment inactive so that they could extract two traitors bearing two valuable head boxes.

For some reason, the value of the information contained in the minds of Colonel Xelven and Count Reginald surpassed almost everything else in Kester Hills!

The only heads more valuable than the two were the heads of Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester.

"Have they been attacked as well?"

Even if they were, Ves doubted that the two VIPs would be so easy to take away. Senator Tovar would have definitely learned his lesson from last and intensified his security at the very least.

Just as he contemplated whether he should stick around or go check up on Senator Tovar's estate, Ves heard a vague noise coming from above. He

looked at the skylight illuminating the chamber from above only to see several objects punching through!

Ves closed his eyes and shielded his face with his forearm. A series of thuds sounded from the middle of the chamber as a small squad of exoskeleton soldiers bore their weapons in each direction.

Two of the soldiers noticed that Ves was still conscious. "FREEZE!"

"Hey, I'm on your side!"

"DON'T MOVE!"

Ves did as commanded as the newcomers swept and secured the entire chamber as well as the reception hall and other side rooms. He sighed in relief as he read their markings.

The heavily-armed exoskeleton soldiers that just arrived hailed from the 1st Adamant Fists of the 3rd New Foundation Division of the Mech Corps. Ves faintly heard more noises in the air from the holes in the skylight. More reinforcements arrived from above.

It was a given that the Honored Ones and the others took notice of the blackout that engulfed Kester Hills.

The conspirators timed their operation precisely. If everything went according to plan, then the treacherous Major Sanawn and Lord Brennan would have just made it off with the head boxes by jumping into the stealthy tunneling machine!

"Is this really the extent of their plan?"

For all the elaborate planning and preparation, Ves again doubted whether they went through all this trouble just to steal away two heads.

"Even so, with those two heads, they can do much."

Both Colonel Xelven and Count Reginald served as the lead negotiators on behalf of their respective patrons. They knew almost as much as Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester, but enjoyed much less security.

Anyone plotting to keep the war going would be able to dig up a wealth of information from their heads. They could easily use their gains to figure out everything the peace advocates had in mind, thereby allowing them to undermine any subsequent attempts at forging an early peace!

If this was the main plan of the conspirators, then Ves had to admit it was clever and exceedingly well-executed. They probably had several more men on the inside to facilitate such an extensive range of sabotage. They encompassed not only the Brighters and Vesians accompanying the peace delegations, but also the supposedly neutral Honored Ones as well!

This conspiracy certainly ran deep!

While the exoskeleton soldiers of the Adamant Fists secured the conference chamber, more armed soldiers arrived from the Vesians and the Honored Ones. The Reinaldians arrived last, of course, but they worked twice as hard in order to make up for their many inadequacies.

The reinforcements took away the two head boxes as well as their damaged and bleeding corpses. The bodies might be salvageable if they revitalized them. At the very least, they offered a good baseline for cloning new bodies for the decapitated heads to house themselves on. Such procedures no longer confounded modern medical science.

After some time, the new arrivals managed to get the security center back online. As they worked away the sabotage, other soldiers took Ves, Venerable Foster and every other member of the delegation into an underground infirmary built underneath the security center.

Naturally, the suspicious soldiers also kept an eye on them in case they posed a threat.

Ves merely shrugged at the somewhat rough and unfriendly treatment. Having been subject to similar situations, he knew better than to take it to heart. The soldiers were just doing their jobs after the Honored Ones and everyone else dropped the ball. Again.

His faith in security dropped by another notch. No matter how many precautions someone took, there was always a way to disable or circumvent them as long as you had a man on the inside.

The soldiers set every member of the delegation aside and locked them in their own rooms while their investigators sorted out the mess.

After roughly half a day, the door opened up. Ves quickly shot to his feet at the sight of Senator Tovar himself!

The old man waved aside his heavy guards before commanding the door to be shut. "Ves. I suppose we have you to thank for saving Colonel Xelven and Count Reginald. This latest attack is far more devious and extensive than we have ever expected."

A thousand questions swirled in Ves' mind. He was so tired and harried about what just happened that he didn't bother to dress up his words.

"What is going on, senator?"

The senator looked a little reproachful. "I suppose you do deserve an explanation after all you have done for us. This will take some time."

Camden Tovar calmly stepped forward and sat on a spare seat meant for guests. "When Prince Colchester and I initially came into contact to organize the peace talks, we quickly received indications that certain elements within our states are aware of what we wish to accomplish. It is very hard to keep a

secret in this day and age. The only way we can deal with this problem is to accept that our enemies will not sit still and act accordingly."

"You mean... you knew we'd be attacked?"

"We knew." Senator Tovar nodded lightly. "In fact, Kester Hills is not as barren and peaceful as you thought. We had many more mechs and soldiers in reserve in the periphery of this retreat, ready to spring into action if anything went amiss."

"Nothing happened for a long time after everyone fell unconscious."

"We made some mistakes. Our backup forces fell under the same sabotage that befell Kester Hills. While our fleets in orbit quickly found out that something went wrong, it took time for them to deploy reinforcements to the surface."

"It's because of Major Sanawn and Lord Brennan, right?"

"Correct. Prince Colchester and I trusted our respective people. Both have served as loyal retainers for a very long time that it is almost unimaginable that they would betray us so. Major Sanawn... how long has she worked for Ramza Family?"

Ves raised his eyebrow. "How do you know she worked for the Ramza Family?"

The senator smiled at that moment. "Prince Colchester and I kept a close eye on our most likely domestic opponents to act against our initiative. Within the Bright Republic, it has always been the Ramza Family that stood against my Tovar Family. Now, we have gathered enough clues and circumstantial evidence to pin this event to the Ramzas!"

"That is.. great?"

There must be a reason why Senator Tovar mentioned the Ramza Family besides informing Ves that they identified one of the masterminds. Was the senator attempting to ruin Ves' impression of the Ramzas so that he would grow closer to the Tovars?

As suspicions welled up in his mind, Ves voiced some of the thoughts he formed during his time of rest in the underground infirmary.

"Regardless of your plans to catch the conspirators in the act, I think it isn't a coincidence that Venerable Foster and I have been brought along."

"Oh? For what it's worth, Ves, I really do appreciate you and your uncanny ability to survive various perils."

"I think that's the main reason why you brought me along, right?" Ves asked with his eyes narrowed in suspicion. "I have a track record of that. You also know my secret weapon by now. It's a weapon that's nearly impossible to hack."

The old man smiled genially at Ves, as if he was a grandpa smiling at a grandchild for impressing with a childish antics.

Ves pressed on. "Something similar must have prompted Prince Colchester to include Venerable Foster in his delegation. As a promising expert pilot who has a decent hope of advancing to ace pilot, she's not just valuable to the Vesia Kingdom, but also to the MTA. No one in their right mind would want to harm a single hair on her when she's outside the cockpit. As long as she resides in Kester Hills, the conspirators aren't able to wipe us all out by throwing an artificial meteorite on the village or something."

"That is very clever of you." Senator Tovar chuckled. "Indeed, expert pilots are just as valuable off the battlefield. Prince Colchester isn't the first person to take advantage of the MTA strictures and he won't be the last. Expert pilots are one of the most valuable bodyguards in the galaxy. I believe Secretary



Lowe once described the two of you as wildcards. That is exactly what you and Venerable Foster are. Both of you complicate the plans of our enemies by your presence alone."

Calling them wildcards was a generous way of describing them as pawns. In both cases, the person holding the cards or pawns called the shots.

Realizing that he'd been used in this fashion left a foul taste in his mouth. Even so, Ves knew better than to express his dissatisfaction. What was done was done, and Ves already sided with the Tovar Family anyway.

"So what now, senator? Have we at least gained something out of this mess?"

Camden Tovar smiled brightly. "Now, the real negotiations begin."

#### **Chapter 1050 Depth of Thinking**

Once Kester Hills got over the attack, the peace talks slowly resumed. Most people affected by the poison recovered without any complications. All of the sabotaged equipment had either been patched up or replaced with more secure gear.

Security practically tripled overnight. Mechs openly patrolled in the outskirts of the retreat without any concern of distressing the members of the delegations with their close proximity.

Frankly, the presence of mechs reassured them. They were much more difficult but not impossible to sabotage, as demonstrated previously when men on the inside scrambled their operating systems.

The Honored Ones were still rooting out the units assigned to secure Kester Hills for treacherous agents.

Even though the peace talks suffered a major interruption that almost threatened to break them off entirely, the negotiators who resumed the negotiations didn't act very reserved despite the absence of their former leaders.

Not everyone knew what exactly happened Colonel Xelven and Count Reginald. Only a couple of people included Ves knew that their decapitated heads had been brought back to a specialized Reinaldan medical facility elsewhere on Harkensen II to attach them back onto healthy bodies.

Even with the best care the Reinaldians could offer, it would take at least a couple of months to insure a complete and healthy reattachment.

As for Ves, he mostly spent his time in his quarters brooding by himself. He wanted some alone time to clear his mind and go over recent events.

Besides, it wasn't as if Venerable Foster wanted to meet him anymore. Ever since he used her as a human shield and surprised her with some of his tricks, she no longer wanted to hang out for him for some reason.

Ves chuckled to himself. "Of course she hates me now. Not that it's any different from before."

This didn't really result in any consequences to him. Ves had the feeling that he had served his use in the delegation. He was a spent card, and so was Venerable Foster. His previous obligation of trying to connect with the Vesians seemed like a giant joke in hindsight. The senator never brought him along to make friends with the Vesians in the first place.

"I'm merely a wildcard who can be put into play when every other card is neutralized."

Senator Tovar kept the rest of his cards close to his chest, revealing little to Ves. This prompted him to spend his time in contemplation by guessing what kind of scheme the senator and prince were running.

"Both of them are aware that they drew the attention of enemies within their own states." Ves observed. "They made several precautions while they waited for their enemies to make a move."

He made another important observation. Though Ves mostly stayed in his quarters, he did hear some gossip every now and then when he went out to eat. The negotiators quickly came to an agreement on the intractable Bentheim issue. It only took two days after the attack for them to settle for a compromise that forced the Bright Republic to concede a small but unspecified amount of tax revenue to the Vesia Kingdom for the next decade!

"Before the attack, the peace talks have stalled for several weeks without a solution in sight. How can they get over their differences so easily all of a sudden?"

By now, the negotiators already moved on to finalizing the issue of settling the ownership of dozens of star systems in the border regions. The brisk pace discomfited everyone, but some were glad that they wouldn't be forced to stick around for months.

Ves had the feeling that everything that happened before was theater in a sense. The threats and ultimatums flinging in every direction served to give the mistaken impression that the Brighter and Vesian peace delegations didn't get along.

"If the conspirators struck during this tenuous period, they can easily deflect the blame to the peace delegations."

The peace talks would certainly break under a tide of mutual accusations and suspicion. It didn't matter at that point if they believed that others were behind the attacks.

However, the conspirators made two mistakes.

First, they didn't completely account for the wildcards in play. Venerable Foster's presence limited many convenient options. Ves' presence spoiled the key part of their elaborate operation.

The second mistake was that they made a move when Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester specifically stared at their domestic enemies. Ves threw out a guess that Flashlight kept an eye on the Ramza Family and other powerful families and organizations within the Bright Republic.

However much Ves found Flashlight to be abhorrent, he did not doubt their competence. No matter how much the others hid their actions, once Flashlight put their mind to it, they got what they wanted.

Once Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester identified their foes and gathered evidence of their misdeeds, they abandoned the puppet show that previously took place. The glacial pace of the peace talks abruptly entered into a sprint, and it looked as if a peace treaty might be formed by the end of the week!

The depth of thinking behind the senator and the prince astounded Ves. "Their plotting is first-class! While everyone was thinking three moves ahead at most, they were thinking six moves ahead!"

What Ves speculated so far only formed the tip of the iceberg regarding the depth of Tovar and Colchester's plans. The peace talks only formed one component of their master plan.

So far, Ves did not think this plan merely aimed to achieve a momentary peace between the Bright Republic and Vesia Kingdom. The two old men were laying the groundwork for something much larger.

Right now, Ves was too far removed from power to even make a guess of what the endgame would look like. What grand design did these two statesmen have in mind for their respective states?

Ves shook his head. "It doesn't matter. I'm just a mech designer."

A mech designer with a special gun, but a mech designer nonetheless. As long as Senator Tovar gave him his bag of rewards and sent him off, Ves was fine with whatever the devious old geezer plotted behind everyone's backs.

The more time Ves spent under Tovar's thumb, the more he realized he was out of his depth. Old fossils like Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester thought and schemed on an entirely different level than normal people. The closer Ves got to them, the higher the chance of getting pulled into another dangerous scheme!

If there was one benefit to the brisk peace talks, it was that Ves saw actual hope in an early end of the war. From the way negotiators agreed on every point and how the Brighter and Vesian members of the delegation bonded over their shared experiences, the impetus to achieve peace was never stronger!

In fact, one of the main reasons why both sides wanted to achieve peace so badly was to spite the conspirators who plotted against them. It was incredibly frightening and discomfoting to be laid low so utterly and completely.

"The warmongers overplayed their hand." Ves remarked.

While Ves didn't know how exactly Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester held the known conspirators to account, it was evident that they no longer feared their opposition that much.

After some time, Professor Ventag finally dropped by his quarters one evening.

"My apologies for my extended absence, Ves. The negotiations picked up so much speed that I've been swamped with work."

"I understand, professor. You have better things to do than pay me a visit."

"Come now, Ves. Don't discount yourself. I heard that you stopped going out since the attack. Are you suffering from any physical and mental repercussions? I can call for specialized aid if you need the assistance."

Ves shook his head. "No, I'm fine. It's just... you know that Colonel Xelven almost got his head carried away. I'm glad I was in a position to stop that, but how can the situation devolve to such an extent that every security measure in place to prevent this attack failed so completely and utterly?"

"Our detractors are numerous and powerful." Professor Ventag remarked. "Their means are just as elaborate if not better than what we have at our disposal. The only way that Senator Tovar can outplay them is to outwit them. It is not a coincidence that while Kester Hills is heavily secured, it did not offer as much security as we do now."

"Are you suggesting that Senator Tovar and Prince Colchester intentionally set us up as bait?"

The professor calmly crossed his arms. "I am not making any claims here. You should be careful of what you say here, lest you be accused of slander."

Ves glowered at that. Obviously, he couldn't just say that the two old men put their delegations which consisted of some of the most powerful and influential military officers, government officials, bureaucrats and academics at risk just to mislead their enemies and to entice them into action.

"The key point here is that we have managed to advance our interests at the expense of our detractors without paying a major price." The Senior continued. "The balance between the supporters of peace and the supporters of war is no longer tilted against us. No matter how much people disagree with Senator Tovar's intentions, it does not change the fact that he carries an official sanction directly granted by the highest officials of the state. To resort to foul play against an official government initiative is already bad enough. To be caught in the act is worse."

There was a hidden implication in the professor's words that Ves picked up with his suspicious mind. "From the way you refer to the government, you

don't just mean that they're paying lip service to the notion of peace, right? The bright president and the cabinet must be fully behind it, belying the previous impression that only a handful of people know about this initiative!"

"Do you think the bright president is stupid?"

"No." Ves shook his head. "You don't get to be the boss of the Bright Republic by being stupid."

"With what you know so far, do you think the bright president would be rational enough to recognize the merits of peace over war? What about his cabinet?"

"If they are as clever as they ought to, they shouldn't be so obsessed about the war and prejudiced against the Vesians to insist on continuing the fighting." Ves observed with greater clarity. "The support for peace isn't as weak as you initially painted. In fact, there should be a substantial amount of support behind it as long as the reasons behind it are compelling."

Ventag smiled and nodded. "That is what we all hope. An important point to take note is that the detractors of the peace talks are also aware of the threat to their interests. They know that if they don't do anything, the peace treaty might become accepted by the two states and go in force. I'll spare you the details, but the outcome of this incident has forced them to curb any subsequent actions."

"What does that mean for us, then?"

"It means that peace is very likely, Ves. Once our negotiators agree on the terms of the peace treaty, the official signing of it can be done in a matter of weeks."

Ves didn't hold much hope for peace before the incident. Peace seemed very far away due to irreconcilable differences between the Brighters and Vesians. Yet now those assumptions seemed laughably off the mark.

For a moment, he felt lost. He only spent a couple of years in military service, but already he felt like he survived a lifetime of war. His memories of his experiences before the war paled in comparison to the perilous but unforgettable missions he took part in. The war shaped both his design philosophy and his attitude towards life.

What would he do once he returned to civilian life as a changed man? Would he miss the excitement, and crave for more? Or would he be able to find the peace he lost as he was constantly subjected to danger?

Whatever the case, peace didn't sound so bad.